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Fasting

I wonder whether we have ever fasted. I wonder whether it has ever occurred to us that we ought to be considering the question of fasting. The fact is, is it not, that this whole subject seems to have fallen right out of our lives, right out of our whole Christian thinking.⁹⁶

—Martyn Lloyd-Jones, evangelical preacher

Abba John the Short, advising the young brothers to love fasting, told them frequently: “The good soldier, undertaking to capture a strongly fortified, enemy city, blockades food and water. In this way the resistance of the enemy is weakened and he finally surrenders. Something similar happens with carnal impulses, which severely war against a person in his youth. Blessed fasting subdues the passions and the demons and ultimately removes them far from the combatant.”

“And the powerful lion,” he told them another time, “frequently falls into a snare because of his gluttony, and all of his strength and might disappear.”⁹⁷

—*The Philokalia* (writings of the Eastern Fathers, c. AD 300–500)

Fasting is one of the fundamental principles of Christian life; it makes the faithful capable of living in accordance with the will of God in all circumstances. Through fasting the will of God becomes more clearly recognizable and is less easily lost sight of. Just as breathing is the fundamental function of physical life in that it enables other functions to stay alive, so fasting and prayer are fundamental functions of the spiritual life.⁹⁸

—Slavko Barbaric, Eastern Orthodox writer

Important Caution: I must begin this discussion on fasting with an important word of caution. If you have any medical condition or are presently taking medication, then check with your physician before you fast. If you have any questions about the adverse effects of fasting on your body, talk to a medical health professional. If she or he says, “No, don’t fast,” then follow their advice. This is very important. There will be more on this later, but I wanted to start the discussion by making this point.

Fasting is challenging, perhaps the most challenging of all the spiritual disciplines. When we fast correctly, we suffer a bit; and I don’t know many people that enjoy suffering. However, we can learn valuable lessons through suffering. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus learned obedience through his suffering. Hebrews 5:7–10 reads:

During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

My good friend Onyechi Oguagha wrote a book about his experience receiving treatment for prostate cancer. In his book, he writes about the lessons he learned through suffering. When people contract a disease like cancer, they often ask, “Why me?” Nichie flips the question and asks, “Why not me?” He writes:

So, “Why not me?” Adversity is not all that bad, you know. As tough as it seems, adversity does carry a positive charge. It strips away all the nonessentials and forces you back to your core values and beliefs, back to the things that matter the most, and back to the bedrock of your faith: Jesus. You will find the strength to carry you through.⁹⁹

Adversity does teach us lessons. Even if pain and adversity are temporary and self-induced through fasting, it can still teach us lessons. I'm not comparing fasting to cancer; please don't think that. I'm making a point about suffering, that it teaches us lessons. When we fast, we suffer (not a great deal, but it is uncomfortable). We grow through suffering. Trees grow stronger because of being buffeted by the wind. Fasting can make us stronger.

The three quotes at the beginning of this chapter each have something unique to say about fasting. The first quote, by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, states that fasting is the forgotten spiritual discipline. In the Western church, he is correct. We aren't very good at fasting. We might as well say we don't practice it. For many of us, fasting is like surgery; we will do it if there is no way around it.

The second quote, from Abba John the Short as found in the Eastern Orthodox collection of spiritual writings entitled *The Philokalia*, connotes that fasting helps us engage in the spiritual battle which is being waged for our souls. When we deny the flesh, we awaken the spirit. Fasting helps us in this endeavor.

The third quote, from Slavko Barbaric, a Franciscan priest and spiritual writer, states that fasting helps us recognize the will of God for our lives. I believe this to be one of the primary blessings of fasting. Fasting opens our eyes to the spiritual realm around us and allows us to know God more intimately than we would otherwise know him.

Why Fast?

Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God.¹⁰⁰

—Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

“Why fast?” I'm often asked this question. The most obvious answer is that Jesus fasted. He fasted in preparation for spiritual battle, before making important decisions, and because fasting was a part of his regular regimen for spiritual living. Isn't that enough reason to fast? If Jesus fasted, shouldn't we?

After I answer that question, people often ask me, “Yes, but

will fasting change me?” The answer to that is, “No, fasting will not change you.” Sometimes people go on extended fasts thinking that they will be changed because of the fast. That’s not how fasting works. Fasting won’t change you if you go into the fast thinking that it is going to change you. But here’s the thing: God will change you as you fast. Fasting doesn’t change us, but God does. Fasting helps us to focus on God so that he changes us. That’s an extremely important distinction. Fasting doesn’t change us. God does.

I heard someone say, “We have to control our appetites, or our appetites will control us.” I like this statement. Fasting helps us control our appetites. When we fast, we say “No” to the flesh and “Yes” to the spirit. The flesh isn’t used to hearing “No.” Fasting prompts a battle between the flesh and the spirit. It’s a battle that must be fought on a daily basis, and fasting prepares us for this battle.

We tend to be pretty inept at fasting. Why? Because it’s tough. It demands something of us. With fasting comes hunger. When we are hungry, we usually satiate our appetite. We grab a snack. We aren’t used to saying “No” to the flesh. And when we say “No” to the flesh, the flesh fights back. The flesh says, “Give me food, or I’ll give you a headache.” The flesh says, “Feed me, or I’ll make you feel fatigue.” So we feed our flesh. Once, twice, three, and sometimes four or five times a day.

Marcia Ford writes about the struggles she had during fasting. She notes:

The first three days of my water-only fast were decidedly unpleasant. The headaches, the hunger pains that were no longer mere pangs, the fuzzy thinking and lightheadedness—it’s a wonder I managed not only to get to work each day but to also retain my job in the process. As a reporter at a busy daily newspaper, I was not in any position to kick back and take it easy for those first three days. More than once I was tempted to quit. Fasting, that is, not my job.¹⁰¹

Anyone who has been on a water-only fast for any extended period of time can relate to what Ms. Ford writes. Fasting is a tough gig. It’s not a walk through the park in the springtime. Especially a

water-only fast or an extended fast.

Fasting is different from the other spiritual disciplines. The flesh doesn't push back when we study our Bible. When we study our Bible, we don't experience physical discomfort. We don't get hungry or thirsty. We don't experience a drop in our blood sugar. When we pray, we don't get a headache. When we drop a check in the contribution plate on Sunday, we don't feel physical fatigue. Our muscles don't ache when we share our faith. But when it comes to fasting, we feel real physical discomfort. When we fast, we experience the battle between the flesh and the spirit. We realize firsthand that "the spirit is willing, but the body is weak." The flesh often wins. Fasting is tough; therefore, it becomes the forgotten spiritual discipline.

Why fast? Marcia Ford lists several reasons for fasting in her book, *Traditions of the Ancients*. She writes:

- When we abstain from food, we free our minds from having to think about an ordinary activity like eating. ...
- Fasting reveals a great deal about ourselves: what our priorities are, how cranky we can be at times, how often we turn to food for comfort and a release from anxiety. ...
- Depriving our bodies of the food we've come to depend on causes us to turn to God as the One we can always depend on.
- Self-denial, when practiced for the right reasons, always leads to a greater degree of self-control.
- Whenever we purposely suffer, we become better equipped to handle hardships in the future, and we become more sensitive to those around us who are suffering.
- Developing the habit of fasting adds to our growing awareness of the value of spiritual exercises and the impact they can have on our relationship with God.
- Fasting sharpens our senses and our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, which makes it an invaluable activity when you're seeking clarity on an important issue.¹⁰²

What Is Fasting?

Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will.¹⁰³

—Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

Fasting is refraining from the consumption of food or both food and water so that you can focus on God. Isabel Bettwy writes:

The word “fasting” comes from a Hebrew word which literally means “to cover or shut one’s mouth.” The Greek word means “not to eat.” Strictly speaking, fasting is voluntary abstinence from food, not as an end in itself, but as a means to holiness. Practically speaking, fasting goes beyond the realm of food into our actions and thoughts.¹⁰⁴

The *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* defines fasting as:

Eating sparingly or abstaining from food altogether, either from necessity or desire. In medical terms, fasting is the detoxification of the body through the restriction of food.... The NT word which is translated “fasting” literally means one who has not eaten, one who is empty.¹⁰⁵

Slavko Barbaric, in his book entitled *Fasting*, writes about the purpose of fasting. He notes, “Fasting allows us to be empty so that we can fill ourselves up with God. In my thinking, this is the greatest benefit of fasting.”¹⁰⁶

Can we call abstaining from other enjoyments of life, like television, music, movies, or leisure reading, fasting? In my opinion, as long as we understand that the strict use of the term “fasting” in the Bible is abstaining from food, then we are safe in stretching the definition to include other things. Please note that I’m stating my opinion here. Strictly, fasting is abstaining from food or from food and drink to focus on God. If we understand the literal definition of fasting, then it is proper to extend the word to apply to abstaining from other enjoyments of life so that we might focus on God.¹⁰⁷

The key to fasting is to take time to really focus on God. Fasting is giving up something good for something better. We give up

good food to focus on God, who is better than food. We give up physical food to feast on spiritual food. Fasting is an act of worship to God. It is an act of faith.

Fasting from food can heighten our spiritual senses. What do I mean? When I fast, I find that I am more focused on the spirit and less on the flesh. Therefore, I experience the spiritual realm around me in a more intense manner. I sense the spiritual battle being waged around me in a greater way. My spiritual senses are heightened. After all, I'm feeding the spirit and not the flesh.

For example, when I fast, I spend the time that I would have spent preparing food and eating meals on reading my Bible and praying. That causes me to be more engaged in the spiritual battle. It heightens my spiritual senses. I experience the Spirit in a greater way. That might seem too mystical for you, but that is my experience with fasting.

If you have not fasted recently, then I encourage you to fast for one or two days. Start small. See if you are not challenged to grow in ways that you have not thought about before. [Note of Caution: If you have any medical condition or are currently taking medication, then you should check with your health care professional before changing your diet or starting a fast.]

Jesus and Fasting

In his thoughtful book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, German theologian and author Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

Jesus takes it for granted that his disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life. Such customs have only one purpose—to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done.¹⁰⁸

When Jesus arrived on the religious scene in Judea, the rabbis had made fasting a ritual that had lost its spiritual value. Jesus wanted to reclaim the value of fasting for his disciples.

Jesus practiced fasting. After his baptism, he fasted for forty days and nights in the wilderness of Judea (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke

4:1–13). Matthew’s text reads, “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’”

First, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the Satan. Then, Jesus fasted for forty days and nights. We aren’t sure how these two statements relate to each other, but it is possible that Jesus fasted in preparation to square off against Satan, since fasting is a means of preparation to face temptation. Fasting teaches us to depend on God and the Spirit, and not on the flesh.

During this time in the wilderness, Jesus also prepared himself for public ministry through fasting. In Luke’s account, we learn that after the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus began his ministry “filled with the Holy Spirit’s power” (NLT). There seems to be a connection between fasting, preparation for battle, and being full of the Spirit’s power. Fasting helps us get spiritually charged and ready to do God’s work.

Today, fasting teaches us to depend on God. If you are about to launch into a new area of ministry or if you are facing a change in your life, fasting can prepare you for that new challenge by preparing your heart for it. This is one of the benefits of fasting.

Jesus taught his community to fast. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16–18) he states:

“When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward. When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face; thus your fasting will not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret. For your Father who sees in secret, will reward you.”¹⁰⁹

Notice that Jesus says, “When you fast” and not “If you fast.” The idea is that Jesus expected his disciples to fast. Their fasting was to be different than the fasting of their Jewish counterparts. They were not to call attention to their being on a fast. Their fasting was to be between each of them and God. Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher, makes a note on Matthew 6:16–18, writing:

One thing more I would mention concerning fasting and prayer, wherein I think there has been a neglect in ministers; and that is that although they recommend and much insist on the duty of secret prayer, in their preaching; so little is said about secret fasting. It is a duty recommended by our Savior to his followers, just in like manner as secret prayer is;... Though I don't suppose that secret fasting is to be practiced in a stated manner and steady course as secret prayer, yet it seems to me 'tis a duty that all professing Christians should practice, and frequently practice.¹¹⁰

Wesley Duewel, a twentieth-century author on prayer, notes:

You and I have no more right to omit fasting because we feel no special emotional prompting than we have a right to omit prayer, Bible reading, or assembling with God's children for lack of some special emotional prompting. Fasting is just as biblical and normal a part of a spiritual walk of obedience with God as are these others.¹¹¹

However, Jesus did not place an external requirement concerning fasting on his disciples. He knew they would keep the Jewish fasts, but he didn't go beyond that. He allowed them freedom to practice this spiritual discipline when they decided to practice it. In fact, in Matthew 9:14–15, we find this interesting interchange:

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast."

Unlike many of the rabbis, Jesus did not place a strict requirement of fasting on his disciples. Jesus wanted fasting to be a matter of the heart. It is interesting that this verse states that "when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast." The bridegroom is Jesus. While Jesus was with them, there was no need to fast because they were celebrating the arrival of the kingdom in the presence of the bridegroom (King Jesus). When the

bridegroom left, then they would fast. The inference here is that we live in an age when disciples of Jesus ought to be fasting. Now that the bridegroom left, do we practice fasting?

The Old Testament on Fasting

Scripture has so much to say about fasting that we would do well to look once again at this ancient discipline. The list of biblical personages who fasted reads like a "Who's Who" of Scripture: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.¹¹²

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

The Purpose of Fasting

Fasting was practiced often during Old Testament times and for a variety of reasons. Let's look at some examples and see why fasting was practiced in the Old Testament.

1. To Petition God and Inquire of His Will

Fasting was used as a way to inquire of God and to seek his will. It was seen as a way to move the heart of God to act on behalf of his people Israel or an individual within his community. An example of this is the fast of King David during the sickness of his child who was born from his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. This is reported in 2 Samuel 12:15–23:

After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

On the seventh day the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, "While the child was still living, we spoke to David but he would not listen to us. How can we tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate."

David noticed that his servants were whispering among themselves

and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied, "he is dead."

Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

His servants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!"

He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

While the child was sick, David fasted. He hoped that through his fast he might move God to act on his behalf. Once the child died, David ended his fast. He had gotten his answer; the child had died. David accepted that answer. David fasted in order to petition God to spare the life of his child. However, please note that God's answer to David was "No." The child died. It is proper to fast in order to move the heart of God, but we must always realize that God is sovereign and his answer to our petition might very well be "No."

The evil king Ahab fasted in order to avert disaster at the hand of God. 1 Kings 21:21–29 records:

"I have found you," [Elijah] answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.'

"And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'

"Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country."

(There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in

the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)

When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."

Ahab sought God's favor through fasting. When Ahab heard the plan God had in store for him, he humbled himself and put on sackcloth. He fasted. God acted on Ahab's behalf and delayed his punishment against him. In this case, God answered the fast of Ahab by delaying disaster until after he had passed. Again, we see that God is sovereign and answers the petitions of fasting in his own way and according to his own wisdom and judgment.

We see another example of this type of fast in the life of Esther. She requested a community fast for God to intervene on her behalf. Esther 4:15–16 reads:

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

God spared Esther and the people of Israel. The plans of Mordecai to hang Haman and persecute God's people blew up in Mordecai's face. The very gallows that Mordecai had built for Haman was used on Mordecai.

In 2 Chronicles 20:2–3, King Jehoshaphat proclaims a national fast to seek God's deliverance from the enemies of Israel. Faced with a great invasion, the king publically prayed. Verses 6–7, 10, and 12 read:

"O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in

your hand, and no one can withstand you. O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?...

“But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir...

O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.”

Jehoshaphat received his answer. His army defeated the armies of Ammon and Moab. Fasting was often practiced in the Old Testament as a means of entreating God. It was practiced as a way to move the heart of God to act on the behalf of an individual or his nation.

2. To Humble Oneself before God (To Repent)

Also, in the Old Testament we see fasting often associated with mourning and loss as well as with repentance. Fasting was sometimes accompanied with the practitioner wearing sackcloth and ashes. Physical discomfort demonstrated the pain of loss in grief or the hurt over sin. Fasting was a way to humble the self or the nation before God. For example, 1 Samuel 7:6 reads, “When [the Hebrew community] 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.’”

During the time of exile, the Israelite people humbled themselves before God in fasting. Ezra 8:21–23 reads:

There, by the Ahava Canal, I [Ezra] 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. I 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.” So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

Nehemiah clearly associates fasting with mourning. He also

accompanies fasting with prayer. Nehemiah 1:4 reads, “When I [Nehemiah] heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”

An example of a sincere fast accompanied by sackcloth and ashes, prayer, supplication, and confession is found in Daniel:

So I turned to the LORD God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

“O LORD, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all those who love him and keep his commands,...

“O LORD, listen! O LORD, forgive! O LORD, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name” (Daniel 9:3, 19).

Through fasting, prayer, and supplication with sackcloth and ashes, along with confession, Daniel set his face unto Yahweh God. This is a beautiful image. Through fasting we set our face toward God, letting him know that we are humble and ready to receive his blessing or his discipline.

In the Old Testament fasting was practiced for a number of reasons. People fasted to inquire of the Lord and seek out his will. They fasted in order to seek God’s aid in desperate situations. They fasted to grieve a terrible loss. They fasted to humble their hearts before God.

Types of Fasting in the OT

Many different types of fasts were observed in the Old Testament. There was fasting from morning until evening (sunrise to sunset). There were one-day fasts, three-day fasts, and three-week fasts. Of course, Moses is noted as fasting for forty days.

The *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* states:

Regular fasts were usually for one day, morning to evening, with food permitted at night (Judges 20:26; 1 Sam. 14:24; 2 Sam. 1:12), although there are reports of longer fasts, such as Mordecai’s call for a

3-day fast (night and day specified) (Esther 4:16) and the 7-day fast at Saul's death (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 3:35). Among special fasts were Moses' 40 days on Mt Sinai (Exodus 34:28) and Daniel's 3-week fast prior to receiving visions (Daniel 9:3; 10:3, 12).¹¹³

Abuses of Fasting

Sadly, fasting was also abused in the Old Testament. Over time, it became an outward act of public ritual that was not accompanied with a sincere, humble, and contrite heart. Fasting became a legalistic custom.

When fasting was abused, the prophets spoke against the people's fasts, letting them know that God was not pleased with their mindless rituals. God wanted their hearts to be engaged when they fasted. Jeremiah 14:12 states, "Although they fast, I [God] will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague." Joel 2:12–13 reads:

"Even now," declares the LORD,
 "return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting and weeping and mourning.
 Rend your heart
 and not your garments.
 Return to the LORD your God,
 for he is gracious and compassionate,
 slow to anger and abounding in love,
 and he relents from sending calamity."

Isaiah speaks directly against the fasting offered to God in his day. He said that God rejected their fasts and was looking for a totally different type of fast than the one the people were offering him. Isaiah 58:3–10 reads:

"'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.
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.
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?"

"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?
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 him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday."

Isaiah let Israel know that God was not pleased with fasting just for the sake of fasting. God did not accept ritual fasts. Israel's fasts had become disconnected from their spiritual lives. They fasted but still exploited workers and quarreled to the point of getting in fistfights. Physically, they looked the part of people who knew how to fast. They bowed their heads and dressed in sackcloth and ashes. But their fasts were good only in appearance. During their fasts their behavior did not change, and their behavior was abhorrent to God.

How should their fasting have looked? It should have been connected with proper ethical treatment of the poor. It should have been consistent with a life that makes righteous moral decisions on the part of individuals and the community. Their physical fasting should have been connected to their spiritual lives. Isaiah describes the fasting that God has chosen. The components of this fasting are found in verses 6–7 and 9–10. They are:

- To fight oppression and injustice, verses 6 and 9b. They were to set people free—to loose the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, and break every yoke.
- To feed the hungry, verse 7a
- To provide shelter for the homeless, verse 7b
- To cloth the naked, verse 7c
- To take care of our own, verse 7d
- To do away with the pointing finger and malicious talk, verse 9b
- Finally, they were to give their hearts, their very selves, to these causes. Verse 10 reads, "...if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed." They were to "spend" themselves in order to meet the needs of the hungry and the oppressed.

To spend yourself on behalf of the hungry and oppressed calls for a deeper commitment than just serving at a food bank once a month or marching in a protest march once a year (although

those can be good actions that lead to the observation of a true fast). God is speaking about a lifestyle that demonstrates care and concern for those who are less fortunate and needy. This is the fast that he has chosen.

This newly defined fast of Isaiah does not negate fasting in the traditional sense of abstaining from food or both food and drink to focus on God. The prophets were correcting the abuse of the discipline. True fasting must be integrated with a greater care and concern for those who are less fortunate. It's not an either/or but a both/and.

There are similarities between this list in Isaiah 58 and Jesus' description of the sheep that sit on his right hand on the judgment day in Matthew 25. God has a heart for the poor. True fasting ought to be connected to the proper ethical treatment of others.

Fasting in the New Testament

In the New Testament fasting is seldom associated with currying the favor and will of God; instead, fasting is connected with getting the heart right with God. There is a shift here. The primary focus of fasting in the New Testament is to prepare the heart of the practitioner to do God's will. Fasting is about the heart, and the heart must be engaged in the fast. We don't fast only to fast; we fast to draw closer to God. Edith Schaeffer writes:

Is fasting ever a bribe to get God to pay more attention to the petitions? No, a thousand times no. It is simply a way to make clear that we sufficiently reverence the amazing opportunity to ask help from the everlasting God, the Creator of the universe, to choose to put everything else aside and concentrate on worshiping, asking for forgiveness, and making our requests known—considering His help more important than anything we could do ourselves in our own strength and with our own ideas.¹¹⁴

The prophets began to change the focus of fasting. That change continued in the New Testament. Keith Mains writes:

To Judaism, a fast was an outward sign of an inward condition. To

Jesus, a fast was an inward sign of an inward condition. The former, if misused, 'a peculiarly ugly form of religious dramatic art,' the latter a part of 'closet' devotions."¹¹⁵

As we fast, we need to make sure our fasting is “an inward sign of an inward condition.”

Fasting in the Book of Acts

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at Jesus and fasting. Let's now turn to the book of Acts and explore fasting in the early church and in Paul's ministry.

The disciples in the early church practiced fasting. Acts 13:1–3 reads:

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. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

This is after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Antioch was a church of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Here we see that fasting in not just an Old Testament practice or a Jewish practice. The early disciples fasted.

They fasted as they worshiped. Fasting, like prayer, can be considered an act of worship. They fasted as a community. Elders, prophets, and teachers joined together in this fast.

Also, they fasted for a purpose—to focus on mission work and to anoint this work before God and the church. This first missionary journey in the early church was launched after the elders, prophets, and teachers in Antioch fasted, worshiped, and prayed. While they worshiped and fasted, the Holy Spirit revealed that Barnabas and Paul should be sent on a missionary journey to the Gentiles. So Barnabas and Paul were selected to go from city to city sharing the good news of Jesus.

Barnabas and Paul accomplished their mission. They left

Antioch and went from city to city preaching the good news. On their trip, they made disciples and established churches in cities across Asia Minor (present day Turkey). On their return trip to Antioch, they stopped in those cities in order to strengthen the new disciples there. That was a common practice of Paul. He would go out on his journey planting churches and on his return trip he would strengthen the church. Barnabas and Paul would revisit cities in which they had been persecuted. They were willing to face the threat of persecution in order to strengthen the young churches in those cities. Paul was interested in helping people mature in Christ. He also wrote letters to churches in order to strengthen the disciples. He sent leaders like Timothy and Titus to churches in order to help them mature. Paul wasn't interested in just baptizing people. He wanted to make sure disciples reached their full potential in the Lord.

As Barnabas and Paul returned to cities on their trip back to Antioch, they appointed elders in those cities. Acts 14:23 records, "Paul 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." The process of choosing elders was accompanied by prayer and fasting. In the book of Acts, fasting accompanied the selection of leaders in the church and the committing of those leaders to the work of ministry/leadership.

Types of Fasting

The Bible speaks of many types of fasts. *The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* lists three types of fasts, stating:

Three types of fast are generally recognized: *normal*, in which there is no intake of food for a prescribed period of time, though there may be an intake of liquids; *partial*, in which the diet is limited, though some food is allowed; and *absolute*, in which there is a total abstinence from food and liquids in all forms.¹¹⁶

There are other ways to categorize the types of fasts listed in the Bible. Fasting can be listed in four categories: the partial food fast, fasting from all food but not from water, the absolute fast, and

the supernatural fast.

The Partial Food Fast

This is the type of fast that Daniel and his friends requested when they were taken into captivity. They only had “vegetables to eat and water to drink” for ten days (Daniel 1:12). Daniel 10:3 reads, “I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.” This is not what we strictly think of as fasting because they didn’t abstain from all food. But it can still be considered fasting.

Fasting From All Food, but Not Water

This is what we traditionally call fasting. We abstain from food but drink water.

The Absolute Fast

This is going without food or water. We read about this type of fast in Ezra 10:6, “Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.” Before Esther went to the king to inform him of Haman’s plans, she asked the Jews to fast for her for three days and nights by not eating or drinking (Esther 4:15–16).

The human body can survive for quite some time without food, but it won’t survive very long without water. Since the body cannot go without water for a very long period of time (at most three days), you have to be very careful when fasting from both food and water. Dehydration can cause permanent damage to the body, or it can cause death. This type of fast should never be performed without consulting a doctor.

The Supernatural Fast

This is when a person goes without food or water for an inordinate amount of time—like forty days. This happened once or twice in the Bible, once by Moses (Deuteronomy 9:9) and perhaps once by Elijah (1 Kings 19:8). Some believe this was also the fast

that Jesus experienced in the wilderness, but Luke 4:2 only mentions that Jesus “ate nothing during those days.” This type of fast is called a supernatural fast because the only way a person could survive this type of fast is with God’s intervention.

My Personal Experience

God can change your life through fasting. I’m living proof. Fasting doesn’t change you, but God does. As you humble your heart before God through fasting, God works on you. Back in the mid-1980s, Leigh and I went for a missionary conference and campaign to Bombay, India. I remember it was in the fall of the year. The conference was amazing. After the conference, we went around knocking on doors, inviting people to church, and sharing our faith. The whole experience was very faith building.

One of the leaders at the conference asked Leigh and me to get some ice cream with him after one of the morning sessions. We felt honored to have this time with this leader. Back home in New York, we had been taught that when we got together with leaders that we should ask a ton of questions. Thus, we would learn from that person. So we went into this conversation with this attitude.

As we began to ask questions, I asked, “What do you see that I need to change to be a more effective leader?” The brother thought a moment, then he leaned forward over the table and said to me, “Steve, you need to get more radical. You are too cerebral. You need to get more passionate for God.” His statement was very direct and quite heated. In fact, I felt the ice cream start to melt down the cone and into my lap. Actually, those were hard words to hear, but I needed to hear them.

When I came back to New York, I decided to go on a water fast for twenty-one days—like the prophet Daniel’s fast lasted twenty-one days. I only drank water for three weeks. I chose to fast for forty days from all types of media. I gave up television, radio, music, newspapers, and magazines. I only read the Bible and in the Bible I focused on the prophets. My study of the prophets during that time turned into a three-volume series on the prophets of Israel. This fast and my study on the prophets during the fast drew me closer to God. God changed my heart as I fasted.

Since then, I've done a one-week fast on just water. I've done a forty-day fast on juices and a sixty-day fast on juices. God changed me through all these fasts. But, I must say, there have been very few times in my life when I changed more than when I did that twenty-one day fast on just water complemented with the forty-day fast from media. The fast allowed me to focus on God; and during that time of focusing on him, he changed my heart and made me into a different person.

It wasn't easy. The first few days were filled with hunger pains and headaches due to detoxification. I had to get the caffeine and sugar out of my system. On about the seventh day, Leigh and I were invited to a house in Staten Island where one of our good sisters in the church cooked up some Southern fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, corn on the cob, and lots of other wonderful dishes. I sat there with my water wishing like everything that I had waited a week to start my fast.

Since I wasn't eating, my sense of smell was heightened. For the first ten days, I could smell every morsel of food within a ten-mile radius. My nose could detect exactly what my neighbors were cooking. I craved food. I didn't crave a meal, just a taste of anything. Just a taste of popcorn. Just a taste of bagel with cream cheese.

During that time, my will was tested like never before. My self-discipline was pushed to the limit. After time, I learned to surrender. Once I surrendered, God took away my hunger. From day ten to when I broke the fast on day twenty-two, I didn't experience physical hunger. I got tired and felt fatigue, but I didn't feel hungry. It was most unusual not to eat and yet not to feel hungry. That's a trick of the human body. You don't feel hunger at this point in the fast, but you grow tired.

As I used this time to focus on the prophets, I saw the way God used them. I studied how radical they were. I longed to be like the prophets of Israel, and God helped me to change to be more like them. That twenty-one day fast was one of the greatest experiences of my spiritual life. I learned so much about myself. I learned how to depend on God like never before. I opened my heart and allowed God to work on my character. I'll never forget

how God worked on me during that fast. I'll always be grateful to God for that time with him as he worked on my heart.

What Are the Benefits of Fasting?

What do we gain from fasting? There are many benefits. John Calvin mentioned three objectives of fasting in his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Holy and lawful fasting has three objectives. We use it either to weaken and subdue the flesh that it may not act wantonly, or that we may be better prepared for prayers and holy meditations, or that it may be a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess our guilt before him.¹¹⁷

I have noticed four benefits of fasting:

1. *Fasting helps us to focus on God.*

Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever

(Psalm 73:25–26, RSV).

When we fast, we make a choice to focus on God. Time that would be spent preparing food and eating meals can now be devoted to prayer and meditation. For some people that could equal two to three hours a day.

Slavko Barbaric writes, “Fasting helps us to cling to the will of God, to understand it better, and thereby, to understand ourselves better.”¹¹⁸

Fasting teaches us that we are completely and utterly dependent on God. We learn that spiritual food is more important than physical food.

Fasting works on our hearts. It causes us to see how fleshly we can be. Wesley Duewel writes:

How do you take up your cross? To take up a cross is not

to have someone place the cross upon you. Sickness, persecution, and the antagonism of other people are not your real cross. To take up a cross is a deliberate choice. We must purposely humble ourself [sic], stoop down, and pick up the cross for Jesus. Fasting is one of the most biblical ways to do so.¹¹⁹

Fasting allows us to focus on Jesus. It allows us to understand how we can take up his cross and follow him.

2. Fasting helps us detach from the world.

By helping us focus on God, fasting also helps us detach from the world. When we fast, it reminds us that we are fleshly creatures with fleshly longings. We need to be reminded of this at times. We get so used to the flesh that we forget the battle between it and the spirit. Fasting allows us to see that we are in a battle and causes us to detach from the world so we can gain power from God. John Piper writes:

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18–20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.¹²⁰

Fasting creates separation from the world, and with that separation comes freedom from its pull. Barbaric writes:

By prayer we attach ourselves to God and by fasting we detach our heart from the good things that tie us to the affairs of this world. Fasting will lead us to a new freedom of heart and mind. Fasting is a call for conversion directed to our body. In a word, it is the process by which

we become free from and independent of all material things. And as we free ourselves from things outside of ourselves, we also free ourselves from the passions within us that are keeping our interior life in chains... Therefore, fasting liberates us from a certain bondage and sets us free to enjoy happiness.¹²¹

When I fast, it makes me realize how much food rules my life. I hunger for food throughout the day. Food takes time to prepare, time to eat, and time to digest. When you don't eat, you realize all the time it takes to feed your body. Fasting helps me understand how I can be a slave to my appetites. Andrew Murray writes:

Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible. Fasting is the other hand, the one with which we let go of the visible. In nothing is man more closely connected with the world of sense than in this need for, and enjoyment of, food. It was the fruit with which man was tempted and fell in Paradise. It was with bread that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. But He triumphed in fasting.... The body has been redeemed to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. In body as well as spirit, Scripture says, we are to glorify God in eating and drinking.... Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves, to attain the Kingdom of God. And Jesus, who Himself fasted and sacrificed, knows to value, accept, and reward with spiritual power the soul that is thus ready to give up everything for Him and His Kingdom.¹²²

3. Fasting helps us purify our hearts.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote a book entitled *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. According to Kierkegaard, purity comes from getting rid of distractions so that we can become single-minded. As a spiritual discipline, fasting can help here.

Barbaric writes:

Through fasting, our hearts become more pure. ...The reason for discontent lies in the fact that we don't see the essential anymore. We have become blind to the essential. Therefore, we are convinced that

we need to have many things. With fasting, we find it easier to see the essential things of life. Therefore, fasting is so important. In making us interiorly free, fasting makes it easier for us to move towards God and towards people.¹²³

William Law in his wonderful devotional book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, writes:

If religion requires us sometimes to fast and deny our natural appetites, it is to lessen that struggle and war that is in our nature; it is to render our bodies fitter instruments of purity, and more obedient to the good motions of divine grace; it is to dry up the springs of our passions that war against the soul, to cool the flame of our blood, and render the mind more capable of divine meditations.¹²⁴

4. Fasting helps us to get ready for missions.

As noted above, when the leaders of the church in Antioch contemplated sending people on a mission, they fasted (Acts 13:1–3). Fasting can help us prepare our hearts for God’s mission.

Some Practical Advice—Medical Alert

A word of caution here: if you have any medical condition, then speak to your health care professional before you change your diet.

Who should be careful?

- Pregnant women and women who are breast-feeding
- Children and teenagers
- Seniors
- Anyone who is recovering from surgery or an illness
- Anyone with extreme weight loss issues
- Anyone who has any type of eating disorder
- Anyone with chronic medical problems like diabetes, heart problems, liver disease, or kidney disease
- Anyone taking medication that might be effected by diet
- Anyone with serious mental health issues

While fasting, it is common to experience discomfort. Besides experiencing hunger pains, you might also experience dizziness, fatigue, headaches, muscle aches, and weakness. If your body is used to sugar and caffeine, then you will experience withdrawal symptoms from those. In the early stages of the fast, these symptoms will be more severe. Over time, you will be able to push through these discomforts. During my twenty-one day water fast, I found days three to five to be the most painful due to withdrawal symptoms from sugar and caffeine. During days seven through ten, I felt enormous hunger pains. During these days, I tried to feel a sense of solidarity with the one-quarter of the people on the earth who are hungry every day. After day ten, the hunger pains abated and I started feeling great. During the last week of the fast, I felt weak. I had to be careful rising from a chair because of dizziness. All of these pains taught me to rely upon God. They reminded me of the constant battle between the spirit and the flesh. I was reminded of verses like 2 Corinthians 9:8 where Paul writes, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

Not everyone should try a twenty-one day fast. You have to consider your body type and how much fat is stored in your body. When you fast, your body lives off the fat that it has stored. Once the body depletes the fat that has been stored, the body then begins to burn muscle for fuel. Remember, your heart is a muscle. Therefore, you must be careful to monitor how much weight you are losing during your fast. If you ever feel like you are going too far, then be wise and stop the fast. As I’ve said before, it is best to check with a health professional before you begin a long, protracted fast. People have died from fasting. You must use wisdom when you practice this spiritual discipline.

Focus

Know why you are fasting. Are you seeking a closer relationship with God? Is it to accompany repentance in your life? Is it to help you focus on a character change? Know the mountain that you want God to move. Name the mountain. Ask other people to pray for you during this time. While you are fasting, spend time

in God's word. Spend time in prayer and meditation. Fast from anything that would distract you from fully concentrating on God during this time of fasting from food.

For me, I love music. All kinds of music. But I decided that during my fast I would not listen to any music. I chose to sing hymns to God. That helped me focus on God. I didn't want to allow anything to enter my life that would cause me to lose my focus on him.

A Few Practical Guidelines

1. If you are new to fasting, begin with a short fast. Perhaps fast from morning to evening. Begin small and then add to the length of the fast over time. Move to a full day (from day through the night). Then move to two full days. Better to start with a shorter fast and accomplish the goal than to set a lofty goal and fall short.
2. As you fast, spend extra time in the Word. Use the time that would have been spent on eating a meal to feast upon God's word.
3. Don't wait for an emergency to drive you to fast. Fast while you are strong. Allow your fast to give you more strength in the Lord.
4. Know why you are fasting. Fast to draw closer to God. Fast to allow God to shape your character. Fast with a purpose.
5. Before you fast, check with your physician and make sure he or she approves the fast.
6. When you fast, you might experience dizziness, headaches, fatigue, or lightheadedness. This is normal. During the fast, your body cleanses itself of toxins. If you normally eat sugar or drink coffee, the body will miss sugar and caffeine and long for them. In time, these symptoms will pass.
7. You will get hungry. Fight the hunger with prayer and time in the Word. Stay as active as possible. Activity takes your mind off the hunger.

8. Break the fast gradually. If it is an extended fast, then you will want to eat a very light meal when you break the fast. Start with soup. Add toast. Add applesauce or a banana. Then move to rice. Give your stomach time to adjust to these foods before you have a large meal.

Remember, fasting doesn't change people. God changes people. Fasting draws us to God so that he can work on our hearts.

Remember, Jesus didn't pray, "If you fast." He prayed, "When you fast." The expectation of Jesus for his disciples was that they would fast. Let's not neglect this beneficial spiritual discipline. Instead, let's draw near to God through fasting, asking him to change our hearts.

A Prayer from Slavko Barbaric:

Father,

I present this day of fasting to you. Through fasting I want to listen to and live your word more. I want, during this day, to learn to be turned more toward you, in spite of all the things that surround me. With this fast that I take upon myself freely, I pray to you for all who are hungry and who, because of their hunger, have become aggressive.

I present you this fast for PEACE in the world. Wars come because we are attached to material things and are ready to kill each other because of them.

Father, I present to you this fast for all those who are totally tied down to material things so that they are unable to see any other values. I ask you for all those who are in conflict because they have become blind in what they possess. Father, open our eyes, through fasting, to what you give us, to what we have.

In Jesus,

Amen¹²⁵

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C

Meditation: Silence, Solitude, Reflection

When we take time for one simple moment of inner recollection and yielding ourselves to God, we see and hear more than the intellectual reasoning of all humanity put together. When we hush our desires and thoughts and turn our attention away from outward things, we enter into the light. And then it is that we discover God reigning on the throne of his kingdom—inside us.¹²⁶

—Francois Fenelon, devotional writer

Contemplation cleanses the mind and opens the heart to receive God's truth, beauty, and wisdom. The illusions of life are unmasked, and true vision is possible. Darkness is dispelled, and divine light shines through. The world loses its opaqueness and becomes transparent. Nature is transformed, time is converted, and people are transfigured. *God makes all things new.*¹²⁷

—Henri Nouwen, theologian

What Is Meditation?

Through meditation we make space for God.¹²⁸

—Corne Bekker, professor and theologian

Simply put, meditation is focus. We stop what we are doing, and we focus. In the Christian context, meditation occurs when we focus our attention on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Scripture, or some spiritual truth, theme, or concept. *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* defines meditation as, “The act of calling to mind