

CHAPTER FIVE

FASTING: WHEN HUNGER = POWER

JOHN LOFTNESS

Fasting, biblically defined, is abstaining from food for spiritual benefit. For most people, fasting ranks right up there with walking barefoot on hot coals, chanting mantras into the night, or taking a bath in goat's milk. As a child I recall telling my mother that I was "starving" when dinner was an hour late. But skipping dinner altogether? When you don't even have the flu!?

Many people in our consumptive society lack the insight that sometimes it is better to deny yourself a good thing in order to attain something even better. That's the case with fasting: by denying ourselves food, we experience a few hunger pangs and a bit of physical weakness in order to grow in intimacy with God and explore new vistas of his truth and grace.

The Purpose of Fasting

Fasting is a biblical practice, not a biblical command. If you have not fasted until now in your Christian life, don't live in fear that you have been disobeying God. You haven't.

“ Behind many of our besetting sins and personal failures, behind the many ills that affect our church fellowships and clog the channels of Christian service...lies that insidious pride of the human heart....

Fasting...is a divine corrective to the pride of the human heart. It is a discipline of the body with a tendency to humble the soul.¹

”

— Arthur Wallis

For most Jews of Jesus' day, fasting was a common practice, rooted not only in their Bible and commentaries but in their culture as well. The Pharisees fasted twice a week—on Wednesdays and Fridays. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' phrase "when you fast" (not "if you fast") shows he assumed this was a regular activity. And though other

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1 Is your view of fasting...

Negative

Positive

Non-existent

Briefly describe your thoughts in the space below.

Meditate on Matthew 6:16-18. How can your face betray your motive during fasting? What rewards do we get from men when fasting? From God?

religious groups criticized him and his disciples for not fasting enough, Jesus predicted that when he—the bridegroom—left the scene, his disciples would fast (Mt 9:15). This last example seems to imply that those of us following Jesus today will participate in the spiritual discipline of fasting.

Jesus felt no obligation to match the self-righteous intensity of the Pharisees when it came to fasting. He saw that their motive was to impress others—perhaps even God—with their display of spirituality. People usually respect such outward signs of commitment, but God looks deeper.

“Was it really for *me* that you fasted?” he asked the pious Jews of the period following the Babylonian captivity (Zec 7:5). The physical practice of fasting won’t make us more spiritual, but it can open doors that we’ve yet to enter in terms of knowing God and delighting in his presence. As we look now at the host of reasons why we *should* develop this biblical habit, let’s strike self-righteousness from the list.

Fasting yields insight and understanding from God.

Are you confused about something in life? Do you need direction? Are you puzzled by a difficult part of Scripture? Fasting can position you to receive God’s answers to your questions.

Daniel was a man of tremendous influence in Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar’s wisest counselor. Yet when the prophet read Jeremiah’s prophecy that the Israelites would be in captivity for 70 years (Jer 29:10), he was stumped. So in the ninth chapter of Daniel we find him fasting and asking God for understanding. While in the midst of his prayer, Daniel receives God’s hand-delivered message from the angel Gabriel. “As soon as you began to pray,” said Gabriel, “an answer was given, which I have come to tell you” (Da 9:23).

We can’t expect Gabriel to show up each time we skip lunch, but we can fast with a biblical expectation that God will give us the insight we need.

Fasting helps us master the desires of our flesh.

There’s a snack room at my office where I can buy candy bars for only a quarter. Recently I found I had slipped into the habit of visiting the snack room every afternoon at around 2:00 for a little boost to my taste buds and my belly. I wasn’t hungry; lunch was only one hour past. I’d

“ The constant propaganda fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. This, coupled with the popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete.²

— Richard Foster

simply taught my body to enjoy that kick of fat and sugar every mid-afternoon. And though my waistline didn't show the effects, I felt God put his finger on my sweet tooth. So I stopped my afternoon candy breaks. For a while I really missed them, my mind sending that "You're starving!" message because my body wasn't get-

ting its food fix.

Candy bars are a minor obsession compared to something like cigarettes, alcohol, or inappropriate sexual excitement. But if through fasting you can learn to subdue your craving for food, you can gain control over lots of other areas as well.

Paul was determined that nothing other than the

gospel of Jesus Christ would master him (1Co 6:12). He disciplined his body so that it would be his slave (1Co 9:27). As fellow servants of Christ, we need to develop the same attitude. If God reveals that we have an undisciplined craving for anything—coffee, nicotine, Diet Coke, or candy bars—we need to show our flesh who is in charge. Fasting is an excellent place to start. This counts for any area of life that needs discipline: control over what goes into our mouths can lead to control over what comes out in the form of anger, gossip, or boasting.

Fasting humbles our souls. Just

before the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, Moses reminded them of what they had learned in the wilderness: "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you...He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8:2,3). But the Israelites quickly forgot. Once they entered Canaan, a land "flowing with milk and honey," they strayed from their dependence on God.

When life is comfortable and we have everything we

2 What's one regular activity that you would really miss if it were removed from your schedule? (Examples: Reading the newspaper, drinking coffee, eating dessert, surfing the web, etc.)

Would you be willing to lay it aside for a month to make sure it hasn't mastered you?

Yes

No

Not sure

Meditate on 2

Corinthians 12:9-10.

How does our weakness make room for God's power?

want—good food, a nice place to live, financial security—it’s easy to forget the One who has given us such blessings. We’re prone to say, as Moses warned the Israelites, “*My* power and the strength of *my* hands have produced this wealth for me” (Dt 8:17). Fasting is a great way to clear our minds of that delusion. Fasting takes away our sense of independence and lets us experience our powerlessness before the Lord.

“ Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, to sacrifice ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.³

— Andrew Murray

In Psalm 35, David says, “[I] humbled myself with fasting” (v.13). When I fast, I feel weak. It sometimes feels like I’ve chosen a day of self-imposed sickness. I’ve never begun a period of fasting thinking, “Oh, this is great!

No food for a whole day!” Sometimes I get headaches, and on fasts of more than a day I can get dizzy if I stand up too fast. Twenty four hours of fasting makes me weak and tired. But it’s a weakness that I highly value because it reminds me of my absolute dependence on God and his mercy. It is this heightened sense of dependence that I consider to be the most valuable result of fasting.

Fasting prepares us for challenging tasks. At different

3 Chances are you don’t have to look far to find evidence of pride or independence in your own life. Write down one recent example in the space below.

points in biblical history we find people fasting in anticipation of a significant challenge. Ezra was one of the leaders who brought the Jews back from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. Before setting out on the long, dangerous journey he called a corporate fast to ask God’s protection (Eze 8:21-23). Jesus launched his public ministry with a 40-day fast (Mt 4:1-3). This time also equipped him to face the incredibly attractive propositions of Satan. Paul and Barnabas received confirmation of their sense of call to apostolic ministry during a time of worship and fasting (Ac 13:2-3).

Are you facing a significant or difficult decision? Is there a crisis in your life? Do you need grace for the week of vacation you’ll be spending with non-Christian relatives? Whether the challenge is spiritual or secular, consider preparing yourself with a fast.

Fasting sensitizes us to poverty and injustice.

The Jews in Isaiah’s day exhibited all the outward signs

Meditate on 1 John 4:20-21. Do you see how God values our horizontal relationships with others as much as our vertical relationship with him?

of righteousness. But God revealed through the prophet that their fasting and religious zeal was hypocritical. Why? Because it didn't affect their hearts. "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" (Is 58:3,4).

Throughout Isaiah 58, God calls for a fast that goes beyond ceremony. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie

4 What is one opportunity you have to address injustice or oppression in your community?

the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?" (v.6) A fast should make us more aware of God *and* more aware of those around us. If we keep our eyes and hearts open, God will reveal human needs whereby the spiritual discipline of fasting can spill over into physical benefits as well.

Fasting aids us in intercession.

The prophet Jeremiah recorded this promise from God: "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me

with all your heart" (Jer 29:12-13, emphasis added).

Fasting is an expression of wholehearted zeal, as we find in the book of Joel: "'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning'" (Joel 2:12). This may be a reason why we don't

sense God's help or direction in our trials. He's looking for fervent searching—a searching that is greatly aided by fasting.

Fasting adds muscle to our spiritual warfare. When Jesus sought spiritual power to withstand the devil and accomplish God's purpose, he fasted. The Bible describes countless individuals and even entire nations who gave up their food to change the course of history by fervent intercession.

“Fasting is designed to make prayer mount up as on eagles' wings. It is intended to usher the suppliant into the audience chamber of the King and to extend to him the golden sceptre. It may be expected to drive back the oppressing powers of darkness and loosen their hold on the prayer objective. It is calculated to give an edge to a man's intercessions and power to his petitions. Heaven is ready to bend its ear to listen when someone prays with fasting.”⁴

”

— Arthur Wallis

Some Practical Guidelines

For Further Study:

Fasting is so effective that it can cause God to reverse his judgment (see Jonah 3, 1 Kings 21:17-29). Arthur Wallis writes, "Because man repents in respect to sin, God repents in respect to judgment. Strictly speaking, then, it is not God that really changes, but man."⁵

Types of fasts. Scripture indicates several different ways to fast:

The normal fast. When I first experimented with fasting, I thought I had to give up everything. I was into the second day when my aunt asked, "Are you drinking any water?" "No," I answered, "I'm fasting." She proceeded to set me straight and spare me from dehydration.

A normal fast excludes food but includes water. At the end of Jesus' 40-day fast, Scripture says he was *hungry* (Mt 4:2). Had he not drunk water during that time, apart from supernatural intervention not indicated in the text, his body wouldn't have made it. In Scripture, absolute fasts are a rare exception. Both Esther and Paul went three days without food or water (Est 4:16, Ac 9:9), but their situations were desperate. An absolute fast should be clearly directed by God and should never exceed three days.

The partial fast. After a particularly disturbing vision, Daniel spent three weeks on a "luxury free" diet. As he describes it, "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" (Da 10:3). If your work schedule is so demanding that you can't cope without food, consider something along the lines of Daniel's model. A juice fast, for example, is completely acceptable, though you should avoid anything high in refined sugar as well as citrus juices (unless they are fresh).

God doesn't evaluate our fasting by the length or totality of our abstinence from food. He cares only for its effect on our hearts. If a partial fast works well with your schedule and accomplishes God's purpose, don't let anyone tell you it's insufficient.

A PRESIDENTIAL PROCLAMATION

"We have been recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

— From the text of a proclamation made by
President Abraham Lincoln on March 30, 1863
calling for a national day of humiliation,
prayer, and fasting.

For Further Study:

As you have time, look at some of the occasions where Israel responded to a national crisis by fasting (Jdg 20:26ff; 1Sa 7:5-13; 1Sa 31:11-13; 2Ch 20:1-30).

The corporate fast. It's a little-known fact that Abraham Lincoln designated April 30, 1863 as "a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer." He did this at two other times during his presidency; before him, Presidents John Adams and James Madison had done the same. In each case the nation sought God's help as it faced the prospect of war.

Corporate fasting results in multiplied power. Jesus said, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:20). Churches and nations can expect an outpouring of God's power and grace when they band together in properly motivated fasting and prayer. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we see God's people feasting and fasting corporately, as noted above in the case of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13.

Planning ahead. The main value of fasting lies not in its ability to impress God, but in the way it sensitizes us to him. Our hunger has no inherent benefit unless it brings us to our knees before God. So don't fast just for the sake of fasting. Enter your fast with a strategy for how you will spend the time and what you hope to accomplish. This will reinforce your motivation and sharpen your concentration. Also, don't make the mistake of gorging yourself before a fast—it just makes withdrawal from food all the more difficult. It's best to make your last meal a light one, especially if you intend to fast longer than 24 hours.

If you have a medical condition like diabetes, check with your doctor before fasting. The same would apply for pregnant or nursing women.

The importance of prayer. Even if you can't set aside time for concentrated prayer, fasting has value as a means of dedication and consecration to the Lord. However, I benefit most from fasting when I take time to make prayer a priority. At the very least, take the time you'd normally spend eating to feast on communication with your Father. Let's take advantage of this time when our spiritual senses can be sharpest.

Working your way up. If you have never fasted, don't think you need to begin with 40 days alone in the desert. A horrible first experience will make it hard for you to consider fasting again. Instead, consider the following progression:

24-hour juice fast. Begin in the evening (after dinner) by consecrating the time to God in prayer. During the following day, drink juice and pray in lieu of breakfast and lunch. Conclude by eating dinner.

24-hour water fast. Same as the above, but drink water

“ Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried. ”

— G. K. Chesterton

instead of juice. You'll find yourself weaker, but you should be able to miss two meals without any significant effect on your work.

36-hour water fast. By skipping your evening meal

you can add 12 hours to your time of fasting. It doesn't matter whether dinner is the first meal or the last meal you miss. The schedule isn't important. Experiment to find what makes your times of fasting most fruitful.

Three-day water fast. I try to schedule this type of extended fast at a time in my calendar when God can do a complete spiritual check-up. Some may do this routinely; others may consider a three-day fast as intimidating as running a marathon. If you're in that second category, this story may encourage you.

5 In which of the following situations would you consider fasting? (Check all that apply)

- You're unsure how to handle a rebellious child
- You are starting or changing a career
- You have a lingering illness
- You understand a particular theme in Scripture, but it hasn't yet changed your heart
- You're concerned about unsaved family members
- You can't seem to shake off a persistent sin
- You grieve over the nationwide practice of abortion

Years ago I had a friend who, after hearing that I was going on a three-day retreat to fast and pray, gave me a look of horror. His religious background made him suspect I was doing this out of some legalistic obligation. He found it nearly impossible to understand why anyone would choose to subject himself to such extended torture voluntarily.

I gave him the chance to find out when I invited him to join me. To our mutual surprise, he came along. And while I spent much of my time fighting headaches and aching muscles (for some reason it was a difficult fast for me), he toiled along as if nothing were wrong, barely feeling the effects.

Typical side effects. If you're unwilling to experience some discomfort,

you're not properly prepared to fast. Disciplining our flesh has a price tag attached. But the benefit you'll receive easily outweighs the symptoms that accompany fasting:

Headaches. This may be your body's way of complaining about caffeine withdrawal, or perhaps you're not drinking enough water.

Drowsiness. As your blood sugar levels drop, so does your energy. One time when I was fasting during an unseasonably warm late winter day I lay back in the grass

“ Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.⁶ ”

— Thomas à Kempis

**Meditate on 2
Corinthians 4:16-18.**

An eternal perspective makes it much easier to tolerate temporary discomfort.

“ Remember that your fast is a privilege, not an obligation. It is the acceptance of a divine invitation to experience [God's] grace in a special way.⁷ ”

— Donald Whitney

of an open field to pray. I woke up an hour later. Though initially I felt guilty, I realized this was just part of the program. Fasting reminds me how weak I really am.

Lightheadedness. During fasts of more than 24 hours you may need to move slowly when getting up out of a chair or walking, and you may find it difficult to focus your mind. This symptom usually passes after a day or so.

Stomach cramps. Mild cramps are common, and can be relieved by drinking water. If you are really uncomfortable, drink juice. If the pains are severe, postpone your fast until you can get some medical advice.

Chills. Because your body is not generating as much heat, you'll be especially sensitive to the cold. Wear adequate clothing and have extra blankets for sleeping.

Bad breath. God won't mind, but be sensitive to others around you and use breath mints.

Heightened sense of taste. Tap water may taste terrible to you when you're fasting. Adding lemon slices to your drinking water will take away the metallic taste. On a positive note, your first meal after an extended fast will taste delightful!

Symptoms will vary between individuals. If you fast longer than a few days, many of these side effects would

disappear until weeks later, when your body would actually begin to starve.

Ending a fast. The longer your stomach has gone without food, the longer you should take when easing back into a regular eating schedule. A friend of mine

phases out of extended fasts by sucking on orange slices one day, drinking broth the next, moving to fresh fruits and vegetables next and only gradually resuming his regular diet. Though this won't be necessary when concluding a shorter fast, avoid the temptation to stuff yourself. You'll regret it.

Finally, finish your fast with thanksgiving. Review the things God has shown you and make specific plans to respond. Having paid the price, take pains to secure your investment.

All the spiritual disciplines require some form of self-

denial. Fasting is probably the most notable in this regard. As with any investment in life, be it investing money or investing in physical exercise, the rewards come later. If your experience is anything like mine has been, you'll be surprised at how little investment yields such great rewards through the discipline of seeking God in fasting. ■

- GROUP DISCUSSION**
1. Who is more deserving of God's grace: A badly overweight couch potato or a highly disciplined, two-fasts-per-week Pharisee?
 2. What would be the hardest thing for you to surrender to God?
 3. Were you surprised by what you learned about fasting in this chapter?
 4. Has anyone in the group had experiences with fasting, either positive or negative?
 5. Are you willing to undergo the discomfort of fasting? Did you know what you were getting into when you accepted Christ as Lord?
 6. If our fasting doesn't earn God's attention to our prayers, how do you explain the fact that fasting makes our praying more effective?
 7. Are you currently facing any situations that would warrant a period of fasting?

- RECOMMENDED READING**
- God's Chosen Fast* by Arthur Wallis (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968)
- Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991)

NOTES

1. Arthur Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968), p.45.
2. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), pp.47-48.
3. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1965).
4. Arthur Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast*, p.50.
5. *Ibid.*, p.56.
6. Thomas À Kempis, Irwin Edman, ed., *The Consolations of Philosophy* (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1943), p.152.
7. Donald Whitney, "Fasting: The Misunderstood Discipline" (*Discipleship Journal*, Issue 67).