

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Dozier, Dan (1992) "The Discipline of Fasting," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss4/9>

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THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

by Dan Dozier

Have you ever played the word association game where one person suggests a word and other people respond with the first thought that comes to their minds? Suppose you go out on the street and randomly select people who will play the game. Give them this word: fasting. What types of reactions do you think you would get? Here are a few typical responses: “hungry,” “hard,” “diet,” “punishment,” “self-denial.” Some people simply would give a blank stare, because the thought has never crossed their minds.

Few things appear as odd in a pleasure-seeking culture as fasting. Maybe it is okay for religious monks and cultic fanatics, but it seems strangely out of place for people approaching the 21st century. Sadly, many Christians share a similar view. Maybe it was okay for Old Testament prophets, but why would a Christian today want to fast? Perhaps that is why it is hard to find many good books on fasting from a spiritual perspective. Consequently most Christians have never read anything about it. Although, there has been a greater interest in spiritual disciplines in recent years, how many people do you know who regularly practice fasting? How often is it the subject of sermons? It is rarely mentioned in Christian circles.

Why has something so frequently practiced in Scripture been so disregarded? Perhaps fasting is perceived as excessive self-denial, or merely an outward form of religion devoid of spiritual power. Others

believe fasting is physically harmful. They believe to be healthy they must have three square meals a day, with a snack between. Our culture scoffs at self-denial and tempts us to satisfy every appetite. Obviously, there are some people who, for medical reasons, cannot fast. However, many Christians today are too feeble, weak-willed, and pleasure-loving to even consider it.

The Bible has an amazing amount to say about fasting. It is mentioned seventy-eight times in its various word forms. Over thirty of those are in the New Testament. The list of individuals who fasted is something of a “Biblical Who’s Who”: Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Joel, Ezra, Anna, Jesus, Paul, and Barnabas. The number of well-known individuals outside the biblical arena who practiced fasting is also quite impressive. As with many other spiritual disciplines, perhaps we need to restudy our view and rethink our practices regarding fasting.

What is Biblical Fasting?

Fasting is not a hunger strike to effect social or political change. It is not for health or losing weight (although it can have beneficial physical results). Essentially, fasting is abstaining from all food and liquids (but not from water) for a designated period of time and for spiritual purposes. The Hebrew word *tsum* is the root word for fast. It means *to cover the mouth*. Another Hebrew word, *anah*, means *to afflict*

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or humble oneself (Lev. 23:27) The Greek words, *nesteia* and *asitos*, mean *to not eat and without grain or food*.

Occasionally, as a desperate measure to meet dire spiritual emergencies, the Jews observed an absolute fast from both food and water. Even then, an absolute fast normally lasted no longer than three days. Esther requested that the Jewish nation join her and her maids in such a fast before she approached King Xerxes on behalf of her people (Est. 4:16). Ezra fasted from both food and water as he mourned over the unfaithfulness of his people (Ezra 10:6). After encountering Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul neither ate nor drank for three days (Acts 9:9).

There were also partial fasts, during which individuals restricted certain foods from their diets. Daniel and his companion ate no royal food. After a ten-day test eating only vegetables and water, the Hebrews were healthier than all other exiles (Dan. 1). John the Baptizer apparently restricted his diet to the meagerest of selections (Matt. 3:4).

Scripture talks about three basic kinds of fasts. First, there was a formal fast, which was public in nature. The Law required that the Jews fast on the Day of Atonement. Those who did not observe this fast were to be cut off from their people (Lev. 23:26-32; Num. 29:7-11). In time, three other formal fasts came to be observed during the year (Jer. 14:11-12; 36:4-8; Joel 2:12-15; Zech. 8:19). Second, there were informal fasts which were a spontaneous response to a difficult situation beyond one's control. David's fasting for his dying infant son shows his helplessness and dependency on God (2 Sam. 12:15-17). Third, there were ritual fasts such as those practiced by the Pharisees, but avoided by Jesus (Matt. 9:14; Mk. 2:18). Jesus depicted this type of fasting as motivated by pride and done for merit. Our Lord had no respect for our self-righteous exhibitionism (Lk. 18:12).

The Bible also speaks of abstinence from things other than food. Paul said that some might abstain from sexual relations for a short period in order to devote themselves to prayer (I. Cor. 7:5). In his commentary on Matthew, G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "Fasting is the denial of everything that interferes with intimate, direct fellowship with the life in God...."

Jesus and Fasting

The only time we read of Jesus fasting was the forty-day period he spent being tempted by Satan in the wilderness prior to beginning his public ministry (Matt 4:1-11). The Gospel accounts record no time in Jesus' earthly ministry when the apostles fasted. Jesus never commanded fasting, but two passages imply that he expected his disciples would fast. The first is Matthew 6:16-18, where his words concerning fasting follow his teaching about prayer. The context is important, for fasting is almost always mentioned in relationship with prayer. Without prayer, fasting is of limited spiritual value. Prayer has fullest benefit when combined with fasting. Also note that Jesus did not say, "*If you fast...*" Rather, Jesus said, "*When you fast...*," just as he had earlier said, "*When you give...*" (Matt. 6:2) and "*When you pray...*" (Matt. 6:5). He assumed that people would fast, and that it was such a common practice they needed no instruction on how to do it. He taught that it was to be done privately, without show.

On another occasion, Jesus indicated that although his disciples were not fasting during his earthly ministry, they would fast after his departure (Matt. 9:14-17; Mk. 2:18-20; Lk. 5:33-38). Jesus did not abolish fasting at all. Rather, he lifted it out of the arena of Pharisaic legalism into the realm of Christian freedom where it has a purpose and power.

Occasions for Fasting in Biblical Times

God's people have fasted on numerous occasions and for different reasons. Some have fasted at times of repentance and confession of sin. This is the kind of deeply moving sorrow for sin that results from knowing how far short we fall of God's holiness. Daniel's prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes, is a beautiful portrayal of one who is grieved over the sin of his people which had led to their bondage (Dan. 9:3ff. See also I Sam. 7:6). God warned, however, that fasting alone, without a corresponding repentant heart, was of no value (Joel 2:12-14; Isa. 58:3-7; Jer. 14:11-12).

People fasted at times of great sorrow and of national tragedy. David tore his clothes, mourned, wept, and fasted at the news of the death of Saul and

Jonathan (I Sam. 31:13; see also 2 Sam. 1:11-12). People fasted at times of sickness (2 Sam. 12:21-22) and at times of spiritual or moral crisis (Joel 1:12-14). Individuals fasted at times of grief over the sins of others (Ezra 10:6). They fasted when faced with formidable tasks and great temptations (Est. 4:15-16; Ezra 8:21-31; Matt. 4:1-11).

People also fasted at times of personal reflection and spiritual reevaluation. Saul fasted and prayed after meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:9-11). In prayer, Saul was reaching out after God. By fasting, he was expressing and deepening his resolution to sacrifice everything in order to do whatever God wanted him to do. No doubt, Saul's prayer and fasting was also accompanied by an intense desire to discover God's will for his life. The early church fasted when ordaining workers for God's service. The church at Antioch prayed and fasted before sending Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:2-3). Later, as these two missionaries appointed elders in each of the newly established churches, they did so with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23).

Various Lengths of Biblical Fasts

Fasts in biblical times ranged from one day, as on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31), to forty days, as with Moses (Ex. 34:28), Elijah (I Kings 19:8), and Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11). All Israel fasted seven days after the burial of Saul and Jonathan (I Sam. 31-13). Daniel observed a twenty-one-day partial fast after receiving a frightening vision concerning a great war. During the three weeks he ate no choice food, no meat nor wine, and he used no lotions. Many Pharisees fasted twice a week (Lk. 18-12).

Is Fasting For Christians Today?

In a world of space travel and heart transplants, do we have anything in common with the people of biblical days? Obviously, we do. Microwave ovens and cellular phones cannot calm the troubled soul, nor can modern technology take away tragedy, sickness, death, sorrow. Computers cannot alleviate temptation, nor can they remove the guilt of sin. Medical science cannot help us discover God's will, nor can it assure us of God's presence when we face life's greatest challenges. Only spiritual realities can touch us at the core of life. We, too, need to express sorrow of sin, demonstrate sincerity of repentance, and make impassioned requests for God's help. Fasting is not just for ancient prophets or religious eccentrics. Fasting should be no more unusual for Christians than prayer. In fact, more of our prayer should be accompanied by fasting.

Fasting allows us to express dependence on God.

It is a way of appealing to God about serious matters over which we have no control. Much of our Christianity is flabby because we are too pridefully self-sufficient to see how much we need the Lord. Fasting turns our attention away from material needs toward the One who supplies all our needs. Hunger reminds us of how weak we are. Pride and a full stomach often are bedfellows. Fasting helps to humble us (Ps. 35:13).

Fasting intensifies prayer. The time spent preparing and eating food can be spent praying. There are times when prayer stands independent of fasting. But there are also times when circumstances are such that prayer needs the company of fasting. In fasting, the whole self is brought to the function of prayer, undistracted by food and focused on God. Prayer and fasting helps us focus more on the essentials of life rather than the non-essentials. It helps us set aside our own needs and desires and helps us become absorbed with the interests of others and the will of God. It is more than an act of abstinence. It is an affirmative act. It is the way of waiting on God. It is an act of surrender.

Fasting also reveals the things that control us. The fact is food controls many Christians. Arthur Wallis writes:

For each believer there is a finely drawn line between the satisfying of the normal desires of the body, and satisfying that inner demanding spirit, that bondage to a fleshly craving, which is not removed because we try to camouflage it. When we cannot say "no" to the second helping of the food we like, though we do not need it; when we are forever having "snack" between regular meals; when we crave special foods that tickle the palate and appeal to our fastidious appetites; when, in a word, food is an ever present temptation to which we constantly yield then it is clear we are in bondage.¹

Paul knew that everything was permissible for him, but not everything was beneficial, and he refused to be mastered by anything. He disciplined his body and brought its fleshly desires under submission to the will of God (I Cor. 6:12; 9:27). Fasting is a discipline which brings freedom from that which enslaves us. If, with God's help, we can bring our appetite for food under control, God can help us bring other areas of life under control as well. But if we fail to deal with our lust for food, our lives are open to Satan's attack along other lines.

Fasting is not a substitute for, nor an escape form

obedience (Isa. 58). It is not a work of merit that brings special favor from God (Lk. 18:9-14). It is not a means to impress others with our spirituality (Matt. 6:16-18). It is not a way of convincing God to do something against his will. Fasting does not change God, but it will change us, especially if practiced with prayer.

Practicing Guidelines for Fasting

The Bible does not tell us how, when, or how long to fast. It was so commonly practiced in biblical days that everyone already knew these matters. The mechanics of fasting may seem unspiritual, yet for those who have never fasted, they are a necessary primer.

1. Make sure you are medically able to fast. Such conditions as diabetes, pregnancy, and heart disease would disqualify individuals. If in doubt, ask your doctor. Healthy individuals can fast for a long time without damaging the body.

2. Prepare yourself mentally and spiritually. If you fast out of a sense of obligation, you will have a difficult time completing the fast, and you will not benefit from it much. Without this preparation, all you will do is think about food all day, longing for the moment you eat. However, if your purposes are clear, fasting can be a most rewarding experience.

3. Try to choose a time when you can retreat from excessive activity. You need time to be with God in prayer and meditation. This is not always possible. Some people set aside a day in the midst of their busy schedules to fast and pray. It simply takes more discipline to accomplish it.

4. Begin with short fasts. The principle is to learn to walk before you run. Begin with partial

fasts. Eat breakfast and skip lunch or dinner. During those meal times you might want to drink fruit juice. After a few partial fasts, skip two meals, drinking only water. Then, progress to skipping three meals (36 hours), and so on. Expect some side effects at first. It is likely that you may experience one or more of the following: some growling of the stomach, lightness of head, a bad taste in the mouth, and slight headache. However, these soon go away.

5. Drink plenty of water. Drink all you want.

6. Eat good, well-balanced meals prior to fasting. Avoid greasy and rich foods. Eat mostly green vegetables and fresh fruit. Do not overeat in order to "stock up." It will only make you hungrier.

7. Mix fasting with prayer, Scripture, singing, devotional reading, and mediation.

8. Keep checking your motives. The Pharisees illustrate how one can observe a spiritual discipline without the accompanying spiritual qualities. Guard against mere ritual, and do not broadcast your fast. If possible, keep it a secret.

9. Break a prolonged fast gradually with light meals that are easy to digest. Your stomach will have shrunk, and it will not take much. Eat fruits, vegetables and juices.

A Word of Encouragement

God's people need to rediscover the spiritual discipline fasting. John Wesley wrote, "Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; others have utterly disregarded it." Let us do neither. While Jesus never commanded fasting, he assumed that his disciples would fast. It has been practiced through the centuries by devoted followers of Christ, and it still holds great benefits for us today.