

FASTING

"Exercise thyself unto godliness." -1 Timothy 4:7

"Full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God." -Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Isn't fasting something only Muslims, Catholics, and fanatical monks do? Is fasting a weigh-loss program? "For some Christians, fasting for spiritual purposes is as unthinkable as shaving their head or walking barefoot across a firepit." (159)

This should hit close to home: Would you believe that the Bible mentions fasting 77 times? *That's two times more than baptism!*

So...what is fasting, anyway?

To put it simply, biblical fasting is voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Two parts of this definition are key:

- Fasting is voluntary, not to be coerced.
- Fasting is for a *spiritual* purpose. Diets are not fasts (sorry!)

Some people also fast from things other than food that are a part of their daily life—again, for a spiritual purpose.

There are many kinds of fasts in the Bible:

- *Normal fast*: abstain from food but not water (Matthew 4:2)
- *Partial fast*: abstain from certain foods (Daniel 1:12)
- *Absolute fast*: abstain from everything (Ezra 10:6)
- *Private fast*: fasting alone (Matthew 6:16-18)
- *Congregational fast*: fasting as the people of God (Joel 2:15-16)
- *National fast* (Jonah 3:5-8)

It's important to note that Jesus expected his disciples to fast (Matthew 6:16-18). And he commands us not to fast as a show of our spirituality before men.

So...what is the purpose, anyway?

There are numerous reasons for fasting. However, notice that none of them are to *earn* God's favor. Fasting is not a way of impressing God or trying to earn his acceptance.

- *To strengthen prayer*: "There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications." (165).

- *To seek God's guidance*: Before Paul and Barnabas would appoint any elders in the churches, they would fast to receive guidance from the Lord (Acts 14:23). David Brainerd fasted as he considered God's calling into the mission field.
- *To express grief*: Don Whitney and his wife fasted out of grief as they watched a dear friend was walking away from the Lord. "She said, after being restored, that knowing we fasted for her was one of the main turning points in returning to fellowship." (169)
- *To seek deliverance or protection*: Esther and the entire Jewish people sought deliverance (Esther 4:16). "Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against 'persecution' from family, schoolmates, neighbors, co-workers, [or even kings] because of our faith." (170)
- *To express repentance*: "Fasting can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction." (171) It's important to realize that fasting can become a dead work if it is not accompanied by a repentant heart.
- *To humble yourself*: Fasting can be a way of reminding ourselves we are not God (Psalm 35:13).
- *To overcome temptation* (Matthew 4:1-11)
- *To express love and worship to God*: "Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God." (176)

We have to remember that fasting is not a way of twisting God's arm or forcing him to do our will. "Fasting should always have a purpose, and we must learn to elevate His purposes over ours." (177) The people in the book of Zechariah 7:5 learned the hard way that fasting is only pleasing to God if it is done according to His will.

So...will you fast?

Jesus promised in Matthew 6:18—"And your Father who sees [you fasting] in secret will reward you." Do you think you can overcome your mild case of fasting-phobia? How many of us miss meals regularly because we are running late or out shopping. Can't you do the same—*but for a spiritual purpose?*

Will you choose to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit to fast in the future?

Start with something manageable, maybe skipping just one meal or two in a row.

Obviously, there may be medical reasons you cannot fast; the Lord knows. However, don't look for reasons that you are the exception to the rule!