

Spiritual Practices, Disciplines, Exercises: **Fasting**

Historically one of vital practices or disciplines for spiritual formation and growth is fasting.

Lent is often seen as a season of fasting.

- Lent begins with Ash Wednesday (2 March 2022).
- The day before (1 March 2022) is often called Shrove or Pancake Tuesday. It is rooted in a tradition from some European countries because eggs, sugar, and fat, are commonly forbidden during the Lenten fast, so they are used up so they will not go to waste.
- Lent runs for 40 days (the Sunday's are not counted – they are seen as little Easter's)

Fasting usually means abstaining from food. Traditionally, no fat or eggs (hence the Pancakes before Lent), no chocolate or wine or other rich foods. But fasting is not just about not eating a particular food, it is about taking that time to be with God in an intentional way.

Many of us have fasted before – perhaps in advance of surgery or some blood work; maybe you grew up in a religious tradition where you practiced a fast of no meat on Fridays; or maybe you've practiced intermittent fasting for weight loss or some other reason.

Christian fasting is not:

- A way to suffer for God
- A spiritual practice that demonstrates how pious or devout you are
- Righteousness (fasting doesn't equal holiness or sanctification)
- A way of trying really hard spiritually that God will respond to
- The same thing as repenting of sin (we don't "fast" from sin, we confess it, receive forgiveness, and turn from it)
- An addiction treatment program (if you feel powerless to break a dependence, reach out for help!)
Instead, **Christian fasting is intentionally withholding something** we'd normally partake in (i.e. food) **for the purpose of creating space in our lives to feast on the presence of Jesus** "directly."

Fasting is a spiritual practice, exercise or discipline that is taught in the Bible. Jesus expected His followers to fast. Fasting, in the Bible, means to voluntarily reduce or eliminate your intake of food for a specific time and purpose.

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. **Matthew 6:16-18***

Fasting is so much more than a tool that maximizes weight loss, cleanses, increases focus, and puts you in the shape of your life. In the Bible, fasting is less about physical health and more about spiritual connection. For thousands of years, biblical fasting has been the practice of abstaining from food for purposes of connecting with God.

Guidelines for fasting from food

- Don't fast when you are sick, traveling, pregnant or nursing. People with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer and blood diseases should not fast.
- Don't fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.
- Listen for a nudging from God to fast.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.

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- If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend the time with God that you would normally be eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting long periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on days you fast. Adjust responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three, meals.
- Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.

What to do in in the time set apart for fasting

- Bring your Bible and a glass of water during your fast.
- Relax and breathe deeply. Place yourself in the presence of God. Offer yourself and your time to God by repeating Samuel's words "*Speak Lord, your servant is listening.*" Or simply say, "*Here I am.*"
- Spend some time worshipping God for his faithfulness. Thank him for where he has come through for you. Psalm 103:1-5 is a good starting point for praise.
- Bring your desires to God. Ask him if this desire is in line with his will and his word for you and the church. Be still and listen. Offer your desires and prayers to God.

Spiritual exercises or practices

- To deepen your understanding of how Jesus denied himself and embraced suffering and death for you, practice some sort of fasting during Lent. When fasting is difficult, share your thoughts and feelings with Jesus. What does Jesus say to you? Tell Jesus what it means to you to share and fellowship with him in his sufferings.
- Fast one meal a week. Spend your mealtime in prayer. When you feel hungry, sit with Jesus in the wilderness and feed on the bread of heaven. Talk to Jesus about what his self-denial means to you.
- During Lent, particularly focus on Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness. Enter the story in your imagination. What do you and Jesus talk about? How are you tempted to indulge yourself? How does it help you to talk to Jesus about this?
- Make two lists: one of needs, the other of wants. Ask God to show you where to fast from some of your wants. Offer to God the time you normally spend pursuing your wants.
- When facing a trial, decide on a fast that gives you time to seek God's strength in your journey.

Lenten fasts have a tendency to be oriented toward things like giving up food or shopping or media or similar things. But there are many other creative ways we can welcome Jesus' healing touch this Lent. Below are some ideas you may want to consider.

- Fast from anger and hatred. Give your family and friends an extra dose of love each day.
- Fast from judging others. Before making judgments, recall how Jesus overlooks our faults.
- Fast from discouragement. Hold on to Jesus' promise that he is at work in you.
- Fast from complaining. When you find yourself about to complain, close your eyes and recall some of the little moments of joy Jesus has given you.
- Fast from resentment or bitterness. Chose to forgive those who may have hurt you.
- Fast from spending too much money. Try to reduce your spending by ten percent and give these savings to those in need.