

Fasting Promotes Spiritual Health

Jesus expected His disciples to fast. He told them, “‘When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, 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 men 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’” (Matt. 6:16-18, NIV).

Notice He said when, not if. Later He defended their abstaining from fasting for a season but indicated that they would resume this discipline after He had died (see Matt. 9:15).

Jesus Himself often fasted as part of His ongoing life of prayer. Throughout history, men and women whose lives have displayed the power and provision of God made fasting part of their spiritual arsenal. And this is the reason we as believers continue to engage in it: to tap into God.

The Nature of Fasting

The literal meaning of the Hebrew word for “fast” is “to cover the mouth.” You may choose to also abstain from other activities during a fast, but a true fast by definition involves abstaining from food.

Food for your physical body sustains it and nourishes it. When we eat food, we literally take the earth and make it part of us.

I am convinced that God designed our bodies to be nourished

and fueled in this way so that we would have a picture of true nourishment—the eternal nourishment of our spirits. Jesus made this clear when He told the devil in the wilderness, “‘It is written: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'” (Matt. 4:4).

God has represented His Word as food that nourishes our spiritual life in the same way that physical food nourishes our physical life (see Ps. 119:103; Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 3:1-3). Just as food strengthens and maintains our bodies, the Word of God nourishes, fuels and strengthens our spirits.

During a fast, you deliberately let go of that which binds you to this physical world—food—in order to receive all your sustenance from the spiritual world. You determine that for a period of time you will deny your physical cravings to focus on your spiritual cravings.

You allow your spiritual hunger to become stronger and more focused. You feed your spirit with the same enthusiasm with which you feed your body. Spiritual hunger takes priority over physical hunger.

Fasting is not a way to influence, impress or manipulate God. It doesn't prove anything to Him. It doesn't show Him whether you are serious.

In fact, He knows your heart better than you do. “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13).

A fast is not a hunger strike designed to convince God to release what He has, up to now, held back. Fasting is not a last-ditch effort to get through to God. Instead, it is a means of sharpening our spiritual senses so that God can get through to us.

Fasting to Hear God

In 2 Chronicles 20, we read the account of a fast King Jehoshaphat called for this very reason. He had received a report that his enemies were allied against him and were nearly at his borders, intent on making war against Israel. "After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to make war on Jehoshaphat. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat: 'A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar' (that is, En Gedi)" (vv. 1-3).

The report to Jehoshaphat was an accurate description of the situation as it appeared from Earth's point of view. The men who made the report had given the facts as they saw them.

But Jehoshaphat was not willing to limit himself to Earth's point of view. He was not satisfied to settle for what he could see. He knew there was more to the picture than the facts that presented themselves.

Dear friend, what situation confronts you today? Do the facts of your situation overwhelm you and cause you fear and anxiety? Do your circumstances look hopeless to you?

Then let the Spirit of the Lord show you the bigger picture—the point of view of heaven. Listen to His voice speaking to you through the story of Jehoshaphat.

What did Jehoshaphat do when confronted with circumstances that threatened to defeat him? "Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him" (2 Chr. 20:3-4).

First, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord. He determined that he would fix his eyes not on what he could see but on what he could not see (see 2 Cor. 4:18).

He was certain that the Lord had an answer and a plan that was

more than he could ask or imagine (see Eph. 3:20). He would not entertain the lie that presented itself to his earth-sight. He resolved to inquire of the Lord.

Second, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. What was the purpose of this fast? What did Jehoshaphat expect the fast to accomplish? “‘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’” (2 Chr. 20:12).

Can you echo Jehoshaphat’s declaration as you look at the situation that confronts you? Are you saying: “I have no power to face this situation. I do not know what to do”? Then follow Jehoshaphat’s example: Take your eyes off the circumstances and fix them on the Ruler of heaven and earth.

How did Jehoshaphat do that? How did he create an atmosphere in which God could give him His vision and His plan for overcoming the enemy? How did he put all his spiritual senses on alert so that God could get through to him? He proclaimed a fast.

The Lord had an answer. He had a plan in place. When the people fastened their hearts on Him, opening themselves to Him through fasting, He was able to tell them exactly what actions to take. Their obedience to His living, present-tense voice released His power and provision (see 2 Chr. 20:1-30).

Eating Spiritual Food

There are a few things you can expect to experience on a fast. First, you can expect hunger. Your physical body needs food and is trained to expect it. You will probably experience both a physical and a psychological craving for food.

If you do, turn your hunger into prayer: “Father, as my body craves food, I crave Your presence. My food is to do Your will” (see John 4:34). Let your hunger be a positive feeling because it will turn your heart to Him. “I have treasured the

words of [Your] mouth more than my daily bread" (Job 23:12).

Hunger and cravings for food will give you the opportunity to present an offering to the Lord. Each time you deny your craving for the sake of your fast, you are placing a sacrifice on the altar. The offering is your obedience (see 1 Sam. 15:22).

You can also expect to experience an increasing desire for the things of God. Just as your body has come to expect food, so your spirit will come to expect spiritual nourishment. God will begin to create in you a spiritual craving that only He can satisfy.

A fast is more than abstaining from food. It is replacing physical food with spiritual food. If you are fasting a certain meal, make that mealtime a time of prayer and study of the Word. If you are fasting for a period of time, fill that time as much as possible with concentrated, focused listening prayer.

Let the Lord set your fast. Don't impose upon yourself a fast to which the Lord has not called you. He is likely to call you into minifasts in the beginning and train you for longer fasts.

Don't set yourself up for failure by fasting in the power of your own flesh. What God calls you to do, He also provides the power for you to accomplish. The fasts to which He calls you will be prime training ground for learning to submit your flesh to the Spirit.

I pray that the Father will usher you into a new dimension of power as He calls you to incorporate fasting into your life. I believe that you have been drawn to these words because God has already placed in you a hunger for the deep things of God, and He is about to show you Himself. You will not be disappointed, for His Word assures us that "He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things" (Ps. 107:9).

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