

How You Can Reap the Physical Benefits of This Spiritual Discipline

At the beginning of the year like this, many churches and individuals engage in seasons of fasting and prayer.

It doesn't matter whether you are fasting for a couple of days or doing a Daniel fast that lasts for a few weeks, the following steps will help balance your praying and fasting season and increase the likelihood of receiving the benefits this discipline offers:

1. Make this a period of personal spiritual renewal. I know you are believing God for many things for this year. I know your church is trusting God for certain breakthroughs. But fasting isn't another quick fix that compels God's hand to deliver our immediate needs. Yes, "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much" (James 5:16b).

So, I understand that we just want to "dive in" and accomplish wonderful results through our prayer and fasting. After all, a lot is at stake, and prayer is our weapon to get things done. That is true, but notice what the rest of that verse says: "Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16a). Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. Then, earnest prayers will accomplish wonderful things. Look out for each other during seasons of fasting and prayer. Fasting should be a time to quiet down, lay at God's altar, humble ourselves, confess our sins and allow the Spirit of God to heal and renew us from within.

The first agenda on the prayer and fasting season should be the individual: you and me. We should take our time in His presence—studying, listening and responding to Him. Fasting

affords us an opportunity to submit and consecrate ourselves afresh to the one who loves us freely.

2. Let it be a period of forgiveness. Fasting should be a potent period to forgive and release the pain we may carry. I know we aren't used to thinking of fasting this way. But what better time than the period of fasting to allow the hand of grace to reach down into our heart and uproot those roots of bitterness, pain and offense? While I was doing research for my recent book on fasting, *Fasting for Life*, I came upon a piece of information that surprised and humbled me. According to a report released by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the rate of divorce (and in many cases, the rate of depression as well) appears to be higher in socially conservative and evangelical states. You can read about this for yourself in *Fasting for Life*, but this bit of news startled me.

How is that possible? We have Jesus in our hearts. We believe in faith, in forgiveness and in healing. What are we doing wrong? I don't have the answer, and quite frankly, neither do social scientists. But is it possible that we are not always walking the walk when it comes to forgiveness? Is it possible that we are allowing life-leaking moments and events to accumulate into dangerous hurt and pain bottled up within? During this fast, take to heart the message of Isaiah 58:6: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke?"

Go to God in prayer this season determined to allow his Spirit to undo the burdens of unforgiveness and let you go free from its oppression. Perhaps the best way to do that is to forgive others, often, the closest people to us—family, friends, parishioners and co-workers—and then we find out that the person just released is us. As believers, we tend to shelve our hurts and offenses instead of dealing with them. Don't do that this time. Use this period of fasting and prayer to acknowledge your hurt or offense before God. Cry before Him if

you need to, but stay long enough in His presence to be healed from within.

3. Be encouraged by the health benefits of fasting. Of course, as believers, we don't fast merely for health or physical benefits. We fast because we are hungry for God and His dealings in our life. But there is credible evidence from biomedical research suggesting that intermittent fasting reduces the risk for diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer's and heart disease. Some of these studies were funded by the National Institutes of Health. I documented many of these studies in *Fasting for Life*, going back up to seven decades of research, including an explanation as to why fasting has such health effects.

As you seek God in fasting and prayer this season, be encouraged that there are potential health benefits. But here is the thing to note: Fasting produces health benefits when it is consistently intermittent. That means that, to get the health benefits of fasting, it needs to be a lifestyle. It needs to be sustained. But it also needs to be spaced out. It cannot be something we do only at the beginning of the year. And then, the rest of the year, we indulge in food unabated. Fasting needs to be consistent and spaced out. Hormesis is believed to be one of the physiological mechanisms that accounts for health benefits of fasting.

And for hormesis to be effective, the body needs to be subjected to mild repeated stress. Fasting is considered a mild stress. For it to be effective, it needs to be intermittently repeated. Some people fast one day in a week, every week. Some fast for two alternate days a week. Yet, others fast three consecutive days once a month. Choose a plan that works for you. But be consistent. You are free to do a partial or complete fast. It's your fast—choose what works best for you at any given time.

4. If you are doing a Daniel Fast, you will have to add this

ingredient. The Daniel Fast is commonly practiced by many Christians and church groups during this period of the year. Often, this fast includes a period of about 14 to 40 days of a mostly vegetarian diet, with 21 days being most common. In studies that have been done on this type of fasting, there are similar health benefits to other forms of intermittent fasting. But one fact is worth noting here: There is a significant reduction in total cholesterol in participants after the Daniel Fast. That is both good and bad. Let me explain.

There are two main kinds of cholesterol: low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL), and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL). The LDL is the “bad” cholesterol. When it accumulates in the blood, it causes plaques in blood vessels, which could block proper flow of blood to the heart and brain. The end result, of course, could be heart attack or stroke. Then, there is HDL, the “good” cholesterol. HDL is believed to shuttle off the bad cholesterol to the liver where LDL is broken down and removed from the body. Well, it turns out that long periods of fasting based on the Daniel Fast tends to lower the total level of cholesterol significantly. For LDL, that’s great. For HDL, that’s not so great. You want high levels of HDL and low levels of LDL at all times if possible.

What’s the solution? Stop the Daniel Fast? Absolutely not. The same research results show that including food ingredients that are rich in HDL during your fasting helps your HDL levels. Include nuts, avocados and olive oil in your diet during Daniel Fast. And if you are open to including skim milk and fish (mostly salmon or tuna), then do it. These ingredients will help boost your HDL levels as you do the Daniel Fast.

5. Drink lots of water. Water is a universal solvent, especially for most biochemical processes in our body. Your body needs water. It may survive for a number of days without food (it has other ways to extract energy temporarily, such as

burning stored up fats), but your body does not have a way to replenish water on its own.

You need water, fasting or not; but especially during fasting. Water helps to cool your system. The regular mitochondrial process (cellular respiration) of using oxygen to burn food items or fat releases energy, some of it in the form of heat. That is partly why your average body temperature is about 37 degree Celsius. That is about 98.6 Fahrenheit. You need water as coolant. You also need water to replace water lost through perspiration, urination and other excretory process. Here is another reason you need a lot of water during fasting: It helps to get rid of excess toxins during this period. Bottom line: Drink lots of water during fasting, not less.

I am glad to answer any question you or your church group may have during this period of fasting and prayer. I am able to respond directly to questions or inquiries submitted to me at . It is my prayer that God will meet with you in a unique way this year. {eo}

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