

The Spiritual Power of Fasting Regularly

Fasting has become more widely practiced in both Christian and secular communities, but as culture begins to emphasize the health benefits of fasting rather than the spiritual benefits, we need to be reminded of God's design for this spiritual discipline. We asked Stephen Myers to take a closer look at what the Bible says about fasting and how we should use it to deepen our relationship with God.

I have never had an extended period of time when food was not available to me—including the time in college that I went hiking along the Blue Ridge Parkway with a few friends.

We planned on a 2- to 3-mile circuit for an easy, early afternoon hike. However, we ended up on a 14-mile loop with 4,000 feet in elevation gain and absolutely no supplies except our water bottles and headlamps.

I understand that many people have endured worse, but for college students who slept through breakfast, skipped lunch and were expecting to get done in time for an early dinner, it seemed like every switchback and obstacle was a painstaking reminder of our need of food for strength. Realistically, we were never really in any danger or in need of assistance; we were just experiencing a higher than normal level of discomfort.

The practice of fasting today has become more widespread and recognized for the health benefits. Practices like intermittent fasting, which for some people is a fancy way of saying you skipped a meal, have become more common.

What about the practice of fasting that is mentioned in the Bible? What, exactly, is that all about?

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, you will find several references to fasting, and with those references are several different reasons that fasting occurred.

Fasting accompanied:

–Repentance (Joel 2:12-13, Ps. 69:10).

–Help with decision-making and discernment (Acts 13:2, Acts 14:23).

–Mourning (2 Sam. 1:12, Neh. 1:4, Ps. 35:13-14, 2 Sam. 12:15-17).

–Reliance upon God (Ezra 8:21-23).

–Fasting was observed by Jesus when the Spirit led Him into the wilderness for 40 days (Matt. 4:1-2, Luke 4:24).

Should We Fast?

Well, according to Jesus, fasting is regarded as the same as prayer and giving to those in need. It is an expression of our relationship with God, and the admittance that we need Him.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us instructions for “when you give to the needy,” “when you pray” and “when you fast.” He was instructing us in practices that are common for believers. In fact, throughout all of Scripture, fasting is mentioned more than baptism, which should tell us the regard with which we should hold it.

I find it interesting that neither Jesus nor any of the other New Testament writers give us a rigid outline for how the practice of fasting should be observed. Fasting does not require a rigid adherence to a standard set of rules. Instead, Jesus speaks to the motive and the measure for how we engage in the practice. We are not to do it for recognition or in an effort to boost our spiritual resume in the minds of others (Matt. 6:16-18).

Fasting as a spiritual discipline requires acknowledging our need for God's provision, whether we are broken over our sin and in need of His mercy and grace, or in need of discernment during important decision-making. Maybe we have lost someone we loved—a family member, a friend or a co-worker. In fasting, we acknowledge our desperate need of God, and we put away the desires of our flesh in search of a deeper relationship with him.

When we had set out for that long, early afternoon hike, we did not know the fullness of what we would experience. The difficult journey exposed our dependence on the things we needed for life, but also provided the reward of sitting atop the mountain that fall day watching the sunset illuminate the amber valley below.

We experienced the difficulties of the journey, but also the blessings of God.

The purpose of fasting as a spiritual discipline is not to deprive us of the things we need, but to bring us to a place where we fully rely on God and appreciate His blessings in our lives.

Fasting takes more effort than just wandering into a situation where this would occur. Fasting occurs by intentionally putting aside the things we rely on or that fight for our attention. Through this act we repent, we rely, we mourn, we discern and we acknowledge the God of the universe who supplies our needs according to His riches and mercy. After all, Matthew 5:6 says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." {eoa}

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