

# *The* FASTING JOURNEY

Sacrifice.

Purpose.

Joy.

Clarity.

PETER R. HOLMES

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# DEDICATION

To all those seeking help  
and greater Christ-likeness:  
may the fasting journey be for you  
a highway to Christ and  
greater wholeness.

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## THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

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In every instance fasting has had a positive impact on me and my deepening intimacy with Christ. As you grow in your own fasting journey I would expect you to experience the same. I know of no more effective way of growing in your relationship with God and in your capacity both to stand with Him and to serve Him.

Fasting has been a key spiritual discipline throughout the history of the church and its leaders. In the histories of Israel, the church, and many nations a call to fasting has heightened the importance of a need, bringing the earnestness of circumstances to the attention of others and to the Lord.

The purpose of fasting must be considered from two perspectives. One is the benefit it brings to us personally in our relationship with God. But the other is the wider benefit it brings to the Kingdom of God. Sometimes the latter does not directly profit us. Fasting is often a way of paying the price in order that others might benefit.

The biblical message seems clear. Fasting, when undertaken righteously, is a spiritual discipline that God is pleased with and is effective in achieving goals that might otherwise be unobtainable. Although much of our focus in a fast is on what we deny ourselves, part of the significance from God's perspective is what is achieved in our own spiritual life. Here are some suggestions, based on my own experience. At the end of the book I have included more specific examples of how this has played out in my life.

### **Growing in Christ**

This is the most fundamental purpose of fasting. When I began the fasting journey in my teens I sensed that such a commitment pleased the Lord as well as introduced me to Him. This deepening intimacy with Christ happened in a number of ways. I could spend time with the Lord for an hour or so each day because I was not eating. Having the extra time allowed me to pray—often just waiting on the Lord or learning to listen to Him, rather than doing lots of intercession.

Other things changed as well. I began to experience some pain in my fasting, and this challenged my will. I found not eating, and the breaking of the routines of eating, to be hard. My body, like anyone else's, rebelled. My will was firm; once I had decided not to eat that was the end of the matter. But having the will did not stop the hunger or the temptation, or the breaking of the eating cycle. I also began to learn that we cannot stop the Enemy from tempting us, but we can stop him from doing us damage.

An illustration of the purpose of fasting was that when I fasted from lunch while at Bible college, eating only fruit, I could then spend time praying with friends such as Steve. Our prayer times may not have had measurable goals like my later fasts did, but they increased my passion for what is now called the 10/40 Window. We were praying for Central

Asia to open up to the Gospel, for God to somehow allow us to move into those countries. We had no idea at the time that it would actually happen! But this discipline began to help us engage with just how much the Lord loved this part of the world.

These missed meals didn't cripple me physically. In fact, they helped keep me fit and healthy! I had no life-changing purpose in mind with this fasting, but it became one way for me to take part in the Great Commission, my calling in Christ to help build the Kingdom of God.

Another example of how this intimacy with Christ grew in me was that even between prayer times I could still sense a focus on the Lord. Though maybe not focusing specifically on Him, I began to realize He was still at my side.

### **Self-Denial**

The essence of fasting is self-denial. Every fast, in some way, is a denial of our way of life. Every fast takes us into the death of self, its desires and often its physical needs. From God's perspective, this is a major benefit! Life becomes a little more God-centered and a little less self-centered.

In the act of surrender to the discipline of fasting we are voluntarily choosing to enter into a type of self-denial that can naturally invoke a brokenness of spirit if we let it. The Lord will not normally humble us, as this is something we should do for ourselves (James 4:10). We surrender to the humiliation of fasting to gain more of the presence and purposes of the Kingdom of God in our lives and in the lives of those for whom we may be fasting.

In the act of the denial of fasting we are choosing to submit to the "sackcloth and ashes," the shame and the weakness that fasting brings. It is embarrassing to discover that missing even one meal is a battle for us, or that we become bad-tempered when trying to fast for twelve hours.

As an extreme example, when I am doing an extended fast I don't have the strength in my arms to carry my large business briefcase, which also contains my laptop. So I am reduced to letting a colleague carry it, or taking just my pad and pencil to work or meetings.

But this process of self-denial goes further. The very act of fasting is itself a way of choosing to make ourselves more vulnerable. The routines and habits we rely upon are undone. When I fast, I am fragile. The discipline of fasting does not engender strength in me, but weakness. Though I have met people who told me that they feel stronger, this has not been my normal experience. Quite the opposite has proven true. I have to reschedule my life, removing all the demanding activities. Even taking out the garbage or carrying in the groceries from the car can be too much. It is humbling to have to admit that you cannot do the things you usually do, or that you aren't feeling too well.

The denial of self means that you have to accept that the normally arrogant, strong self is not in charge anymore, and that without it you feel quite weak and exposed. Though humiliating for this to happen, it can lead to a deeper humility and brokenness of spirit.

### **Your Will Takes Precedence over Your Body**

The denial of the fast also impacts the way you are as a person. By denying yourself something you want and have relied upon, you are changing all your basic priorities. Things are turned upside down. You will look at your life from a different perspective, as those elements that have propped up your day-to-day existence are withdrawn. You encounter elements of yourself of which you may have been unaware.

When you are abstaining from food there is an added dimension. You are no longer living to eat, or eating to live. You are doing neither. Instead, you are saying to your body, *Shut up! Be quiet! Stop moaning!* It can moan quite a lot, even if you simply miss your usual evening meal.

Your fast is placing your spirit and will over and above your body's needs. You are entering a time of significant self-denial where you are exploring what will happen to you physically as you stop eating. You have not been here before with your body. This is a first.

But something much deeper is also happening. You are shifting your priorities so that you have time on your hands that would otherwise be used to meet your appetites. You are telling your body you are in control of the situation, and you are not going to allow your physical self to have its wishes. Such rights, demands, and appetites are at an end for a season. There are other things in life that you are placing at the top of your list, above your physical needs. So your body should be silent while you get on with the far more important task of self-denial.

### **Affirming Your Earnestness**

As part of asserting your will over your body you are also making declarations about the seriousness of your intent. This is an act of sacrifice. The stakes are higher; the intensity of your commitment is stronger. The daily routine of your life is interrupted. Instead of competing with other demands, through your fast you can engage a depth of priority that you would not find any other way.

I often hear people say that they could never fast. They don't want to give up an aspect of their life for a season, especially if that aspect is food! But I know they could do it if they wanted to and were willing to begin to practice. The psychology is simple. We are always faithful to our own personal needs. We all have a basic instinct to put ourselves first, though few of us ever consciously admit this. We all have the tendency to deny that we can do something, if we don't want to do it, while often somewhat deviously affirming outwardly that we wish we could. What we don't admit to ourselves is that we will not do what we do not want to do. We all find the will to do what we want to do. By choosing to fast we

are making a commitment to fully cooperate with ourselves in allowing this to happen.

My point is that we must be serious about the discipline of the process. We are choosing not to waiver, even though we have no idea what will happen. We are not going to change our minds when we get our first headache, or discover that we overlooked a dinner date—the perfect excuse to stop fasting. What I am commending here is the mindset of the hunger striker. We can learn much from such people. I am not necessarily commending the cause, just the dedication. Fasting is the ultimate eyes-ahead, regardless-of-the-cost, focused commitment, whether for one day, three days, or longer.

Or it is like the soldier, under orders from his commander, who walks into the oncoming fire bracing himself for the shells. He will not run, cower, or hide. Most men at one time or another feel this type of call on their lives. They just need to get on and do it. Women likewise can have the same mindset taking on the risk of childbirth. You are dead serious.

But such uncompromising resolve impacts us in other ways as well.

### Surrender to Christ

Perhaps the most significant purpose of a fast for most of us will be the act of love in submission to Christ. If you are open to the idea of fasting to the Lord, He could easily lead you into a fast for no other reason than obedience or surrender to Him. Your reason for fasting could simply be nothing more than the fact that the Lord requires or invites you to do so. Our discipleship journey is one of increasing surrender to Christ as part of our growing Christ-likeness. Fasting is a very tangible way of achieving this.

### Fasting as Prayer

Of course, whatever the specific reason for fasting, it is always an act of intercession. Its core benefit is to unleash more of God's purposes by standing in allegiance with Christ. Fasting for me, personally, has had very little to do with the Enemy, though that may be the case for some. Fasting has always been between Father God and me. Regardless of what I am fasting for—the nation or renewal, knowledge or money—the nature of the fasts and their function all tend to be quite different. One thing all of them have had in common, however, is that a prolonged fast is its own prayer: praying in an intercessory way as you are before God. Throughout a fast you need to see your life as prayer.

During a shorter water-only fast it is easy to see the fast as simply missing a meal. I would discourage you from this. Think of it as a four-hour fast, or as a six-, eight-, twelve-, or twenty-four-hour fast. When you start your fast, your act of intercession begins, even if the next mealtime is several hours away. Be aware that you are fasting, even if you are taking the children to school or functioning in your normal employment. You may spend the mealtime in prayer instead of eating, but that is simply a more concentrated part of the intercession that began several hours earlier.

Although I find it difficult to pray in the traditional posture of bended knee during extended fasts, the essence of the fast itself is intercessory prayer. Your life, pain, and obedience are the intercession. Here your weakened physical condition and its submission is your prayer. Your fasting is itself your plea to the Lord. The very act of fasting is a declaration to the Lord of what you desire. It is an act of importunity, your persistent hammering on the doors of heaven—but in a meek and humble way that is brought about by your devitalized condition. *Listen! Look at me! I am in earnest! I am desperate! I am in great need! Answer me, please!*

As the days go by during an extended fast, just staying on the fast is the major victory each day; and your life and condition are your prayers to the Lord. Just continuing in obedience is enough. After the initial period of settling into the fast, it can get easier for a few days—though you remain aware that what you are doing is prayer, that God is listening. But later I have regularly experienced a deep weariness, not caused by the lack of food but merely by the length of time. This is when the intercession of your life bites deep. Your pain and its weariness becomes your prayer. You begin to realize that going further will become an even greater battle. At this time, especially, my life truly becomes my intercessory prayer. I become my own sacrifice.

### **A Means of Change**

Another common purpose and benefit of fasting is that it achieves change where it previously has not been possible. This change can be either a personal matter or something related to others. It could be for a congregation or even for a nation. This is the kind of fast that we do when we need to break the mold. We need to make a new start, to break a deadlock.

A parallel in Scripture is when David turned around at the walls of Jebus, or Jerusalem, and said, “Whoever leads the attack on the Jebusites will become commander-in-chief” (1 Chronicles 11:6). Joab was over the wall first, and lived on as commander of the army for almost all of David’s reign. Someone had to break the deadlock and move forward. When Joab did so, then everyone else could follow.

Fasting is a spiritual weapon, like Joab himself was on this occasion. It is the act of the spiritual warrior, the leader, the commander, the captain. It is the men or women who take authority by taking responsibility for the need for change. They step out, and through their fast they begin to possess what change is needed. I have numerous personal examples of

this, but the one I especially recall was when our business was close to marketing a key product and we didn’t have enough money to launch it. The normal sources, like banks, were closed to us. The future of the company depended on it, so I fasted and began to see the necessary funds come in.

I have won most of the battles in which I have engaged. I believe my failure rate has been greatly reduced because I was merely following the Lord in these conflicts. Fasting is one of the ways we can “turn up the volume” in helping to win a battle. By this I mean that we can, through fasting, bring a much greater pressure for positive change to bear on spiritual reality.

Often I have found myself talking to the Lord about a fast for some time before I actually enter the fast. A fast normally grows on me over a month or two, because fasting is always the final act. Fasting is the final form of intercession, when everything else has failed. You may sense you have the answer already, but you know you need to act by taking authority and responsibility over the situation to actually change it. Your prayer will be your action. You are now taking authority, confident that the fast you are on will deliver what you need if you act in obedience and humility. All of my fasts have been based on very specific goals. These goals themselves become the prayer.

### **Repentance**

Repentance as a nation or self-denial before battle in war is another kind of fast. Fasting preceded historic moments in Israel’s history and the church’s history. We can observe three such fasts in Scripture. In one we see the Law of God being given through Moses (Exodus 34:28), in other instances we see the Israelites fasting in times of crisis (Judges 20:24–26; 2 Chronicles 20:1–4), and then we see the perfecting of the Lamb of God. Jesus came out of the fasting temptations (Luke 4:1–13) in absolute

purity, so by His life, which was His prayer, He could go to His death and bring about our life. Along similar lines, Daniel's fast recorded in Daniel 9 was prayer that brought about the salvation of Israel. By changing our focus away from our day-to-day life, God's perspective can become clearer, and such "truth" effectively enables our repentance (see 2 Timothy 2:25–26).

You may feel there is an area of your life or the life of another that you need to engage with a deeper repentance. Fasting is a significant way of focusing yourself on this goal.

### **Growth in Spiritual Gifting**

I had always sensed that I had received a particular spiritual gift from the Lord at my conception. However, the ability to use this gift freely came only after I had done a specific fast. The obedience of the fast released it to me. Along similar lines I found myself fasting for money from the Lord that, in a sense, He had already provided through someone. He had told this person to give it to me. During the fast I realized that this man was waiting for me to ask, and only then would I see the provision I was seeking.

When our ministry is made more effective through fasting, there is significant benefit to the Kingdom of God.

### **Engaging the Enemy**

Perhaps you have a personal problem, or a stalemate with a person you are seeking to help, and it won't shift. Or maybe your congregation or house group is facing an obstacle. You have tried everything else; fasting is all that remains. You then do what Christ has told you to do. You are now cast upon the Lord in a last-hope bid to see the matter resolved. If you are experienced in fasting, you might commit to an extended fast.

But be careful. You should never be so presumptuous as to address the Enemy directly or pretend you have some spell or power over the demonic just because you are fasting. Normally you will be weaker, not stronger, in body and spirit. So it is important that in any and every fast your focus is on Christ Himself. He is your Lord and you answer to Him alone. It is from Him that you are seeking knowledge and change. You are not seeking some special power over the Enemy. The answer to your prayers and your fasting are with Christ, Son of the Living God, second Person of the Social Trinity and the author of all life.

As a result of your fast you may gain the knowledge that you need to break the power of the darkness. Alternately, you may simply discover that God has intervened in an apparently unrelated way and the problem no longer exists. Whatever the outcome, the balance of power in the spiritual world will be different because of your fast, and God will have more room to act.

### **Sharing in Christ's Sufferings**

The essence of the Atonement is the giving of Christ's life to all those who will accept His sacrifice. It is Christ's death for our life, an act of voluntary love on His part that we can now appropriate for ourselves. In the same way that we accept this sacrifice of Christ we also accept the discipline of fasting. We surrender to it, suffering for a season and thereby choosing to associate with Christ in His surrendered sacrifice. This is the kind of attitude Paul had in mind when he suggested that to share in His glory we must also be willing to share in His sufferings (Romans 8:17).

As with baptism, I believe that as we go under the "waters" of fasting so we can rise again later into the life Christ has promised us all. For a season we voluntarily place ourselves under the waters of darkness, so that by our denial we are able to seek the Lord in a way we would not be able to in the normal routines of our life. Just claiming back the time we

normally spend eating can provide an extra two to three hours per day, making a critical difference in our prayer and intercession life. We are standing with Christ for a season in a more sacrificial way.

### **In Summary**

Two simple goals under-gird fasting. Initially fasting should be an act of knowing God better and deepening our relationship with Him. But it will soon evolve so that the ongoing goal will be to see change and breakthrough in areas where they would not otherwise be possible. The act of fasting should take you from sacrifice to clarity. We may not necessarily start with these battles. Simply learning how to fast is battle enough for some of us. But in time, as we grow in this discipline, fasting will become a treasured means of achieving a God-given goal that has remained elusive.

Of course, fasting is in part a mystery. We should never treat it as a formula, a way to manipulate God to give us what we are seeking. It must always remain Christ-centered and fully in submission to His purposes and priorities. For some of us it will be a weapon we use frequently. For others it may be more occasional. But I feel Scripture is clear that fasting will yield significant fruit for all who are willing to enter into the sufferings of Christ in this way.

As I close this chapter I would suggest that you give some thought to this question: If you were to start fasting, what would be your purpose? Would it be to learn more about this spiritual discipline? Perhaps you know that God wants to stretch you in new areas of your relationship with Him and this is one way of doing it. If so, fasting will represent a major step forward in your Christian life. Or perhaps your purpose for fasting would focus on a particular need you are facing. I will address these more specific goals later, helping you learn how to identify them.

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Whatever your purpose for fasting, you have a demanding and yet rewarding journey ahead of you.



## THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF FASTING

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Although the Bible does not have a lot to say about fasting, what it does say helps set the stage for the modern practice of the discipline. In this chapter I will outline some of the basic teaching from Scripture, quoting the verses using the New International Version text.

I will comment on these verses where helpful or necessary. I would encourage you to read the passages in their full context in your Bible, inviting the Lord to speak to you through the passages. We have much to learn about how to encourage each other to fast.

### **Old Testament Passages**

Almost all major religions practice fasting. The motives for fasting in paganism are for defense and protection. For instance, in many religions it is thought that, following an individual's death, it is not wise to eat when the dead person's spirit is still around, as revenging spirits infect the

food. Fasting is recommended.<sup>1</sup> Though we normally think of fasting in the context of food, other forms of abstinence were practiced as well. For example, the Israelites, along with other ancient societies, abstained from sexual relations prior to a battle.

In broad terms, the Old Testament references represent fasting as a discipline for seeking guidance, for suffering vicariously, and for expressing grief, penitence, brokenness, or humility. Fasting held a significant place in Israel's religious life, being mandated by law and required of all citizens. Though not mentioned frequently, it was part of the basic fabric of religious life in Israel.

Christianity today can be quite passive, as we expect others to look after us spiritually. Here in Scripture we see examples of God's people actively participating in a sacrificial way to achieve God's purposes. This is at the heart of the discipline of fasting. In Hebrew, the most common word for fasting has the same root as "to humble" or "to afflict" one's self or soul.<sup>2</sup> Affliction of oneself is seen as correction: of changing (i.e., repentance), or birthing, or bringing about a desired goal. In Psalm 119:71 the psalmist says, "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."

**Preparation for Service.** Fasting is associated with religious ritual in preparing oneself for sacred service, where individuals focus on their spiritual and emotional preparation and state, thereby denying their physical needs. The following Scriptures echo this practice of afflicting oneself as a purification rite in the context of the Day of Atonement:

1 F. S. Rothenberg, "Fasting," in C. Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1971), 611–14.

2 P. Wenger, "to humble" (semantic field 6700), in W. A. van Gemeren, ed., *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996), 451.

This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or an alien living among you—because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. (Leviticus 16:29–30)

The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. (Leviticus 23:27)

**A Facet of Prayer.** Fasting can be both an essential attitude and practice for a person conversing with God.

When I went up on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water. (Deuteronomy 9:9, See also Exodus 34:28.)

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. (2 Samuel 12:16–17)

So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. (Ezra 8:23)

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4)

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (Daniel 9:3)

It was following Moses' fast that he was given the Ten Commandments. This was a supernatural fast. Not eating for forty days is possible, but going without water for that period is practically impossible. Most people could go without water for only two or three days before doing serious damage to their body. Moses was clearly supernaturally sustained by God during his fast. When God wants to begin a new thing He always accompanies it with the supernatural, and fasting is often part of that process.

**Times of Peril.** The Israelites called for fasts when there was a danger of war or plague or at critical moments in their history.

When the Benjamites came out from Gibeah to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords. Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the Lord. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord. (Judges 20:25–26)

Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord’s men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!” (2 Samuel 11:11)

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).

Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to enquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. (2 Chronicles 20:2–3)

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews— young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day. . . . In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. (Esther 3:13–14; 4:3)

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:15–16)

What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten. . . . Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. (Joel 1:4,14)

Fasting was also used to call out to God for a safe journey:

There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a

safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. (Ezra 8:21)

**Breaking Oppression.** It was practiced when a person or the nation was oppressed by great problems. Sometimes accompanied by the mocking of others:

“David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground. But he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.” (2 Samuel 12:16–23)

“Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother . . . But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee; attackers gathered against me when I was unaware, they slandered me without ceasing.” (Psalm 35:13–15)

“When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn.” (Psalm 69:10)

**Confession and Cleansing.** Fasting is associated with repentance. Crying out to God for spiritual cleansing can be accompanied by fasting.

Samuel said, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.” When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord.” (1 Samuel 7:5–6)

When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. (1 Kings 21:27)

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. . . . They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. (Nehemiah 9:1–2)

Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:4–5)

This type of fasting was ordained in the Law of Moses for the Day of Atonement:

The Lord said to Moses, “The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. Do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God. Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people. . . . It is a sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.” (Leviticus 23:26–32)

**An Act of Remembrance.** Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, four fast days were instituted as a way of remembering four specific events associated with those lamentable days.

Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me: “Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?’” (Zechariah 7:4–5)

Again the word of the Lord Almighty came to me. This is what the Lord Almighty says: “The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.” (Zechariah 8:18–19)

**In Times of Loss.** Fasting is frequently associated with times of mourning.

Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. (2 Samuel 1:11–12)

Fasting also exposed personal inner torment:

I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.  
 . . . My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt. (Psalm 109:22, 24)

**National or Regional Fasts.** Calling a fast of the whole nation was not uncommon during a crisis. Many of the Scriptures I have cited were fasts called by the leaders of the nation or a region or town. As a modern example of something similar, during the darkest days of World War II Britain was called to fast and pray in light of the imminent threat of

invasion from Hitler’s Germany. The invasion never came, and instead the Allies were able to invade Europe and bring the war to an end.

**Length.** Though the lengths of fasts varied, they often lasted from morning until evening:

Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the Lord. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord. (Judges 20:26)

As we have seen, David and his men fasted till evening upon hearing of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:11–12), and the fast accompanying the Day of Atonement lasted from the evening of one day till the evening of the next day (Leviticus 23:32). After Saul’s death some of the Israelites fasted for seven days (1 Samuel 31:13).

**Ineffective Fasting.** Not every fast recorded in the Old Testament was pleasing to the Lord. God took exception to the hypocrisy of Israel’s fasts, and the prophets declared that without right conduct fasting was in vain.

“Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:3–7)

Then the Lord said to me, “Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.” (Jeremiah 14:11–12)

Ask all the people of the land and the priests, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?” (Zechariah 7:4–5)

Though it is evident that not every fast is a success, that should not stop us from practicing the discipline. But we must always be cautious about measuring fasting by outcomes. Some of my longest fasts had the least visible positive outcomes at the time. I have entered fasts in which afterward I could see they were only for the purpose of breaking my eating habit or my presumption about food or money. We should always ask ourselves, *What has the fast done within me? How have I been changed by the fast?*

### **New Testament Passages**

Considering the significance of fasting in the Old Testament period, there are relatively few references to the practice in the Synoptics (the first three Gospels) and very little elsewhere in the New Testament. However,

historian Oskar Skarsaune demonstrates that fasting, like other aspects of Jewish religious life, found its way into the early church.<sup>3</sup> Since fasting was such a well-established part of Jewish religious tradition, it is safe to assume that as Jesus grew up He would have been drilled in its practice. Prior to his public ministry, I feel quite certain that Jesus regularly practiced fasting during the religious fasts of Judaism.

By the time of Christ there were two established fast days per week. In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee congratulated himself for fasting twice a week (Luke 18:12). Fasting, however, was not a practice needed by Christ’s disciples during His earthly ministry:

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?”

Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.” (Mark 2:18–20)

This has led some to argue that because we now have Christ and we are in a new period of history with God, fasting is no longer required. This argument can be supported in part by the very sparse evidence in the New Testament of the practice among believers. But in reality the argument that the practice has been superseded by Jesus Himself is not valid for several reasons. Scripture hints at the possibility that Christ may have merely suspended fasting among His immediate disciples for

<sup>3</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 363.

the three years He was training them, while assuming that following His departure His disciples would fast:

Jesus answered, “Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.” (Luke 5:34–39)

Jesus instructed His followers how to fast properly, avoiding drawing attention to themselves. Clearly His intention was to ensure that a new code of conduct would accompany fasting in the lives of His followers. Traditions and practices needed to change when His followers fasted:

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. (Mathew 6:16–18)

In Matthew 17 we read about Jesus healing and delivering a boy who suffered from seizures as a result of a demon. When Jesus’ disciples asked Him why they had been unable to drive out the demon, He answered, “Because you have so little faith” (Matthew 17:20). Jesus then assured them, “Nothing will be impossible for you.” Though its textual credibility has been questioned by scholars involved in newer Bible translations, the footnote of the New International Version records that Jesus also said: “But this kind does not go out except by

prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21). This is what the Lord has spoken about with me many times as part of my fasts.

I would contend, therefore, that Jesus taught that certain demonic enslavement necessitated fasting for healing, though we have no record of Him fasting in order to do this Himself. Nevertheless, He seems to be instructing us in finding keys to help people who are enslaved. In my own ministry experiences this teaching has proven true, as I will be illustrating later.

As noted earlier, Oskar Skarsaune makes a compelling case that the early church naturally adopted a number of Jewish ritual practices, from the Seder (sacred meal), to meeting for hymns and exaltation, to the writing of literature to maintain the traditions and values taught by Christ.<sup>4</sup> I believe it is also safe to assume that the first believers adopted practices regarding the importance of fasting, as seen in the following verses:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2–3)

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. (Acts 14:23)

Three times in his letters Paul referred to his fasting, though the fasting might not have always been voluntary!

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<sup>4</sup> Much of Skarsaune’s book, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, pertains to this topic.

I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:27, See also 1 Corinthians 4:11 and 2 Corinthians 6:5.)

Jesus fasted for forty days prior to the commencement of His ministry. This was a unique moment in Christ's life, as we do not read that He fasted again. Only Moses and Elijah shared the experience of a forty-day fast.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. (Matthew 4:1–2)

Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 34:28)

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. . . . Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by

that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. (1 Kings 19:3–8)

These three fasts symbolize three significant stages related to the birth of the church. Moses was the Lawgiver, Elijah was the Prophet applying the Law, and Jesus was the King fulfilling the Law. Each stage was accompanied by a forty-day fast.

Though Scripture does not hint that we need to take up the practice of a forty-day fast, I find clear biblical evidence that through fasting we can participate in seeing breakthroughs in specific areas of our own lives and the lives of others, as well as in our churches, towns, and other areas. I would conclude, therefore, that fasting is a spiritual discipline that God encourages us to develop and to learn to use effectively.

### Adopted by the Church?

What we see in the Old Testament is a kind of recidivism, or backsliding: the people of Israel embracing covenant relationship with the Lord but then compromising their commitment through sins of greed, selfishness, and unwillingness to follow the Law of Moses. Fasting followed this pattern and expressed the same ebb and flow, being undermined by human baggage and sin. Nevertheless, the practice of fasting continued to be part of the religious life of Israel into the postexilic period—surviving even to the time of Christ.

In the Synoptic Gospels we read that Jesus criticized the hypocritical practice of fasting. Christ himself fasted, however, as part of His preparation for ministry. And the early church doesn't seem to have questioned the value of the discipline.

In fact, fasting became a regular part of the spiritual disciplines of the church after the New Testament period, used as a valuable tool for self-humbling, intercession in crisis, and as a source of income for the

poor—as believers gave to the needy either the food that they abstained from eating or the money they would have spent to buy food. What we see, some would say, is an overzealous commitment to fasting as a way of life. Fasting was practiced for a number of reasons, including breaking physical lust, disciplining the body, and progressing toward Christ-likeness and spiritual maturity.<sup>5</sup> Some of these values and principles are of importance to us now, as we shall note in due course.

Richard Foster, in his popular book, *Celebration of Discipline*, offers us a significant overview of the biblical and historical precedent of fasting: “The list of biblical personages who fasted becomes a ‘Who’s Who’ of Scripture: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the Prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son. Many of the great Christians throughout church history fasted and witnessed to its value; among them were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney and Pastor Hsi of China.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Teresa Shaw has carefully reviewed this area in *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). Together with others, she has documented the move toward extreme behavior in suppressing physical needs, etc. The graphic detail of some of this behavior would be offensive to us today—especially women starving their bodies in order to look more masculine, following the Greek adoration of the male body (pp. 220–252). For those interested in more of the background of the post-New Testament church’s attitudes toward fasting, see the appendix at the end of this book.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper and Row), 42.



## AREAS OF ABSTINENCE

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