

A Practical Guide to Fasting

As a spiritual discipline, fasting fell into decline for many years, and is only now regaining its rightful place in the hearts and minds of Christian people. In the history of the Church fasting has accompanied other more severe forms of self-denial and was thought to be the practice of the ascetic, not of the average person. Also, perhaps because of the rationalizations of a secular society, there has been a tendency to regard fasting as dangerous to the health. Now, in what seems to be an age of spiritual and physical enlightenment, many people have incorporated fasting into their personal disciplines.

Fasting has been observed by Christians from earliest times. Jesus himself practised fasting. When Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit, he entered the wilderness and fasted. (*Luke 4: 1-2*) He abstained from appointing a particular fast day upon his followers, though the Jewish Christians observed the Jewish fasts. Jesus taught a new way to observe the fast as stated in Matthew 6: 16-18. In the book of Acts, Luke writes that people were worshipping and fasting in the church at Antioch. (*Acts 13:1-3*) The Church suggests that its members observe self-denial at appropriate times in the Church Year. From time to time religious leaders call for days of fasting and prayer as a means of showing the seriousness of a resolve or to deny oneself so that funds could be made available to the needy.

As is often the case, when a practice has been held in light regard for a space of time people are perplexed about how to respond to the call for fasting. The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide some helpful guidelines.

Why Fast?

Fasting releases toxic juices that have been built up from things consumed and can make a person feel better, more alert and responsive to the world around him or her and to God. Primarily we would fast for a spiritual purpose.

For the Christian, the purpose of fasting is the positive effect achieved through self-denial. It is an act of humbling oneself before God in older that there might be closer communion with our Creator. Fasting disrupts the process of 'going our own way and doing our own thing' and restores us to a our reliance upon God. Each pang of hunger is a reminder that because we love God, we are doing something we don't have to do; thus, each gentle reminder of our self-denial is an opportunity for prayer. Such beneficial aspects of fasting are evident even in very shortened periods of fasting such as simply skipping a meal.

Further, deeper benefits of fasting come after longer periods of self-denial. At these times, the mind seems much more attuned to God's will for us, perceptive of God's voice and willing to respond.

Scriptural Basis

In the choice of wording, "*Whenever you fast*" (Matt. 6:16), Jesus is not necessarily commanding everyone to fast. It is clear, however, that fasting was a normal activity of the Jewish faith and that He expected fasting to be a normal thing for His followers to do. Although defending His disciples for not fasting while He was with them, His statement in Matthew 9: 15, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.", indicates that He expected His followers to fast in the days and years ahead.

Scripture is filled with examples of the practice of fasting on special occasions:

- 📖 Moses fasted (*Ex. 34:28; Lev. 16:29-31; 23:14; 23:27-32; Deut 9:9.18*);
- 📖 as did David (*II Sam. 1:12; 3:35; 12:16-23*);
- 📖 the prophet Elijah (*I Kings 17:6, 14-16; 19:8*);
- 📖 Daniel (*Daniel 9:3; 10: 2-3*;) and
- 📖 Paul (*Acts 9:9*).
- 📖 Jesus fasted for forty days and nights following His baptism. (*Matt. 4:2*).

Length of Fasts

Warning: Do not fast for longer than one 24 hour period without consulting a doctor. It is important to drink fluids while fasting. Do not fast if taking medications.

The normal fast involves abstinence from solid foods but not from water or other liquids. In the scriptural references, where the fast was absolute, the wording spells out that there was neither eating nor drinking. Such absolute fasts are not recommended. As indicated above, the body can survive quite well, even benefit from periods of abstinence from food, **but water is essential to good health.**

For the person who is initially fearful of undertaking a fast, the variety of liquids available today can be a real help. Nutritional fruit juices and liquid soups can be substituted for meals the first few times the individual undertakes to fast.

As previously indicated, simply skipping a meal can be spiritually beneficial and could be considered fasting. On the other hand, Moses and Jesus engaged in forty day fasts. The more normal fasts people engage in today are of one to three day durations.

The one-day fast usually begins after a meal-lunch or dinner - and runs until that meal the following day. Thus only two regular meals are missed. A one-day fast could be carried out by most people on a regular (say, weekly) basis. Begin slowly, perhaps missing one meal a week, then trying one whole day a month. Choose a day when you will not be involved in much physical activity.

Combine fasting with a retreat day of prayer, meditation and bible study.

There is something of a direct relationship between the length of a fast and the benefits gained from it. The one-day fast is long enough to make one feel uncomfortable from the lack of food and thus conscious of the act of self-denial. In turn, the individual is reminded to pray and is demonstrating humility before God by the very act of self-denial. Furthermore, when a man or a woman is fasting for a particular purpose (for example, prayer for world peace), that purpose is called to his or her mind for prayer or action. They may also want to set aside an amount of money equivalent to what their food would have cost to be given to a worthwhile purpose, especially to feed the hungry. The one-day fast, particularly when carried out on a regular basis, can be spiritually rewarding.

To reach the clearness of mind and sensitivity of spirit that allows a deeper communication with God may require a three-day fast. It is best not to plunge into a three-day fast without some experience with shorter periods of fasting. The three-day fast is especially appropriate when guidance is being sought from the Lord on matters of real consequence in the life of the individual such as; a possible vocational change, seeking one's ministry, or dealing with a recurring problem.

Before engaging in a longer fast more study of fasting is recommended than can be provided here.

Partial Fasts

When, for health or other reasons, a person cannot participate in a formal fast, a partial fast may prove meaningful. Sometimes this will be for a short period of time and will take the form of abstaining from one or more types of food or drink, such as meat or alcoholic beverages. At other times, the partial fast may extend over greater periods of time and one may feel led by God to deny oneself some form of food or drink, indefinitely.

Many people participate in the so-called "fast of devotions" by refraining from food for an hour or two prior to receiving the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation at Holy Communion.

Likewise, God might lead an individual to deny himself or herself in other ways as an act of discipline, obedience and love. Again, such abstinence could be for a period of time (such as for Advent or Lent) or indefinitely. Coupled with the self-denial could be promptings to take on new areas of ministry as obedience to God.

Two points should be noted about such promptings, however:

- ✦ If God initiated them, they will enrich the individual who responds.
- ✦ Such actions should not be considered normal fasting, lest the practice of fasting be lost among a myriad of worthwhile endeavours.

Private and Community Fasting

Our Lord has cautioned us against making a display of our righteousness in fasting; "*Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.*" (Matt. 6: 16) Obviously, when we fast privately we should keep the matter, insofar as practical, between God and us. We can make other people, including our families, unduly uncomfortable by talking about our fasting in a self-righteous manner.

Whereas private fasting can greatly enrich the individual who participates in it, community fasting also has its special place. There is a sense of fellowship and community of spirit in knowing that others are participating in an act of self-denial. The Jews of the Old Testament had regular days of public fasting; and Christians today are called to fast on Good Friday and Ash Wednesday.

Church leaders and others sometimes call for days of fasting and prayer. We need to encourage others to join us in these acts of public fasting. Our leaders need our spiritual support, and corporate acts of self-denial can be powerful demonstrations of that support.

Some Cautions

Clearly there are some people who should not fast, or should do so only minimally. People who are already undernourished or are experiencing physical or emotional exhaustion should not fast. Nor should pregnant women, diabetics or people with heart trouble. **If you question whether you are physically fit to fast, gain medical advice.**

Some Practical Matters

As with all self-denial, there is discomfort involved in fasting. The grumbling of the stomach that is used to being well fed is obvious, but there can also be headaches, especially if you habitually drink coffee or tea. Dizziness can also be experienced particularly if you move abruptly.

These are normal manifestations of bodily change affected by your not eating and should simply be coped with as best you can. **If these symptoms become alarming, please interrupt your fast with a light meal.**

If you are planning a three day fast, you can reduce the problem of caffeine withdrawal by abstaining from coffee and tea for two or three days before you begin your fast. For the sake of your digestive tract, it is also a good idea to have a meal including fresh fruits and vegetables immediately before beginning your fast. Don't try to fool yourself and your body by overeating at the last meal prior to your fast.

Some Spiritual Matters

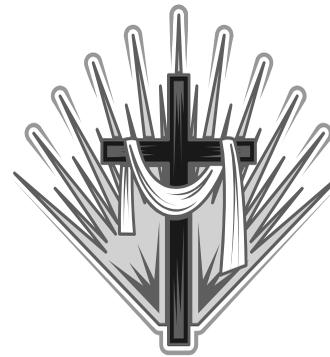
Having covered so many practical matters, let us not forget why we would fast in the first place. John Wesley once said, "*First, let it [fasting] be done unto the Lord with your eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven.*"

If we keep a journal during our fast, particularly if it is a three-day one, we can learn a great deal about ourselves. A friend said that for every one thing we learn about God in prayer, we learn ten about ourselves. That is particularly true during periods of fasting, and it is helpful to work through those thoughts and to preserve them by putting them down in writing.

Fasting can help us to experience the closeness of God's presence and special love of us. Through fasting we are likely to receive guidance from God, particularly if regular Bible study is a part of our discipline.

Effectiveness of prayers, ability to focus one's attention rather than being confused and distracted, and special revelations from God, are normal occurrences during periods of fasting.

Anyone who has kept a strict Lenten rule, whether it involved fasting or not, knows the glory of the Easter that follows. So, it is appropriate to close by noting that, on the other side of the fast is the opportunity to feast upon the things of God, the Easter glory in which God calls us to live.



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Prepared by the Toronto Diocesan
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