

DRAWING NEAR TO GOD

Through Prayer & Fasting

By Mark Becton

Why Fast?

We may be compelled to fast for various reasons. Some are good. Others are not. The eroded conditions in Jerusalem (physical and spiritual) drive Nehemiah to fast and pray. (Nehemiah 1:1-11) He does so to repent and confess his and Israel's sins. He also fasts and prays to see what role God wants him to play in Israel's turnaround.

Those are good reasons, but there are wrong reasons too. You don't fast and pray to lose weight. Though Jerry Falwell Sr. lost 80 pounds in two consecutive 40 day fasts, it wasn't to lose weight. It was to seek God on Liberty University's behalf.

Furthermore, you do not pray and fast to be seen as "super spiritual." People did that in Jesus' day and He calls them out on it. (Matthew 6:16-18) "If all you want," Jesus tells them, "is to be seen as spiritual. That's all you get." Doing so they missed the true benefit of praying and fasting...drawing near to God.

Drawing near to God is the purest reason to pray and fast. That's Moses' reason for his 40 day fast on Mount Sinai. (Deuteronomy 9:9, 18). It was likely Anna's reason for making prayer and fasting a regular part of her life. (Luke 2:37). Even Jesus did so before beginning His intensive three-year ministry. (Luke 4:1-13)

Drawing near to God through prayer and fasting often resets our eyes. We not only see God's nature more clearly, we also do a 360° degree view of His faithfulness. We see His care and leading in our past, His presence and activity in our present, which enables us to rest in His ongoing presence and faithfulness in our future.

Of course, prayer and fasting also gives us a fresh view of ourselves. Though the initial reveal is uncomfortable, the whole experience shows God's loving kindness. As God promises in Hebrews 12:6, He confronts and disciplines those He loves.

How to Fast

Most followers know how to pray. However, some may have never combined it with fasting. That's why many questions about prayer and fasting are practical. We want to know the "How to's" of fasting. The insights below are from the late Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ (*Partners in Prayer*, John Maxwell), Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church, Springdale, Arkansas (*The Power of Prayer and Fasting*) and my own.

Understand the aim of fasting

Fasting's aim is to draw near to God. Removing something we depend on, something that delights and fulfills us, reminds us that our dependence and delight is to be in Jesus alone. Therefore, when we long to have whatever we are giving up, it reminds us of two things. First, we delight and depend on Jesus alone. Second, it reminds us to pray.

Soon, we'll talk about what to pray when fasting. But for now, we need to understand how to choose the type and time of your fast.

Choose your type of fast

There are various types of fasts in the Bible. Daniel uses a *partial fast* in Daniel 10:3. For three weeks, he abstains from delicacies such as meat and wine. Many see this as eating only fruits and vegetables. Paul drinks only liquids in Acts 9:9. Moses abstained from both food and liquids in his 40-day fast. (Because of the potential physical problems, a physician needs to be consulted before conducting such a fast.)

You can fast items other than food. According 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 sexual intimacy between a husband and a wife is one. I've heard of others fasting television or time on social media. In fact, it may be good for any prone to an eating disorder to fast something other than food.

Parents whose children want to understand fasting will need to talk with them. Help them determine what they delight in or depend on. Guide them in what would be a wise and healthy fast for them. Talk with them about your experience fasting and praying. Listen to theirs' as well.

Make a workable prayer list

Write your prayer aims on paper and keep a journal. In the process of the fast, God may answer it specifically or change it dramatically. But one thing is sure; it will help you know what God has said during your fast. That is why you can download the 20 Day Prayer-Guide. The pages reserved for "REFLECTION" can help with this.

Read Isaiah 58 and Luke 4

Isaiah 58 contrasts the differences between sincere and insincere fasting and prayer. God describes His disdain for insincerity as well as the blessings to expect when sincere. Luke 4 prepares you for spiritual challenges. It records Satan tempting Jesus during His forty days of prayer and fasting. Since the aim of prayer and fasting is to draw near to God, Satan works to keep you from it. Expect challenges from him.

Pray and read scripture vulnerably

The purpose of a fast is to draw near to God. Our reason for drawing near is to know and want what God knows and wants. This happens by spending time in prayer and scripture. Doing so, God highlights scriptures verses He wants you to see which may alter your prayers.

As is true with many heart-to-heart talks, the way the conversation ends may be different from the way it started. What you thought you needed from your fasting and prayer may be different than what God shows you.

Take it one day at a time

I read of a 5-year-old who was confused when her daddy told the family that he was going to fast and pray. After little Ginny learned that fasting meant not eating, she shouted, "You

can't fast, Daddy! You'll die." Trying to calm her, Ginny's mom and dad explained that men and women in the Bible fasted. Ginny thought for a moment, then the panic returned as she shouted, "And they're all dead!"

By the second through fourth day of an extended fast, you might think you are going to die because of what you are giving up. Don't think of the length of your fast. Simply focus on and be faithful each day. Take it one day at a time.

Slowly return to your normal diet

If you have fasted food for an extended time, return gradually to your normal diet. Take it slowly so your digestive system can adjust. Again, it may be good to seek your physician's advice.

What to Expect When You Fast

A year after retiring, my dad underwent triple bypass surgery. He and mom asked questions and were given pamphlets to read. They wanted to know what to expect from "open-heart surgery." Of course, they expected physical affects, but they were not prepared for what Dad experienced emotionally. Since then, others told me how their open-heart surgery was both a physical and emotional experience.

Prayer and fasting resembles open-heart surgery. You place your heart in God's hands. He examines it and mends any damages making your heart healthier as a follower. But make no mistakes, the process of prayer and fasting affects you both physically and spiritually. We see this in Luke 4:1-13. From Jesus' experience, here is what to expect.

Physical Side Effects

If you fast food, expect to experience hunger. Jesus did. Luke 4:1-2 describe Him as hungry. The Greek word depicts someone aching for food. When fasting food, you may also experience dizziness or headaches. I've found that drinking juice, if you are allowing for juice in your fast, helps subside the side effects.

Temptation

Greek grammar in Luke 4:1-3 implies Jesus was repeatedly tempted during His 40-day fast. Satan is relentless. He doesn't want you drawing near to God. Even if you succeed in completing your time of prayer and fasting, Satan still tries to destroy your experience with God. These verses also show Satan's strongest temptations coming at the end of Jesus' fast. Therefore, keep guarding your heart days after you've completed your fast.

Humility

Fasting and praying is a humbling exercise. During the experience, passions vying to overthrow God's reign in your life surface. Satan tempts Jesus with three passions. They include PERSONAL APPETITES ("Tell the stones to become bread"), PERSONAL AMBITION

(“*The kingdoms of the word are Yours if You worship me.*”), and PERSONAL ABILITIES (“*Jump from the temple and let the angels catch you. Show everyone what you can do.*”)

We forget God led Jesus into the wilderness not just to pray and fast, but to be tempted. (Luke 4:1-2) Jesus’ temptation reveals how Satan tempts us. He goes after our appetites. Is there anything you must have more than following Jesus? Some of those “must have’s” include ambitions. Is having a certain income, position, or recognition more important than following Jesus? Then there are our abilities. Because you can do something does not always mean Jesus wants you to do it. Do your abilities dictate what you do instead of following Jesus’ lead in all decisions?

I’ve found extended prayer and fasting to be a humbling experience. God surfaced when good desires and efforts had subtly taken over. Though they were good causes, I had placed them over following Jesus.

During your fast, your personal passions will surface. Like me, you will have to go through the humbling exercise of asking yourself, “Are they more important than my submission to and intimacy with Jesus?”

Is It Worth It?

As stated earlier, the aim of fasting is to draw near to God. Removing things you depend on or delight in resets your focus on Jesus alone. This prompts you to pray more frequently and earnestly. As also explained, extended fasts affect you both physically and spiritually. You may struggle with hunger pains, headaches and temptations. Knowing these are real challenges to prayer and fasting, you might wonder, “Is it worth it?” Let me answer that with something I wrote in my book *Prayer Works when You Work at Prayer*.

For our twentieth anniversary, Loree and I fly to New York City. Of course, we go to see the Empire State Building. To purchase tickets, guides direct us downstairs where we stand in line in a hallway. The line seems short so we wait. When our line turns into a room, we see rows of people waiting to buy tickets from two tellers. But, it’s the Empire State Building and we are too excited to turn back.

After purchasing tickets, Loree and I bolt from the room and are pointed to an escalator. We were on our way up. Our smiles disappeared entering another hall and line for the metal detector. Thirty minutes later, we walk through without a beep. With the elevators in sight, an attendant says, “To your left, please,” It’s another room of ropes and lines. Funny two lines ago, Loree and I are now grumpy. Our mood lightens though as we step into the elevator.

The viewing deck of the Empire State Building is on the 86th floor. Our elevator stops on the 80th floor and another attendant instructs, “Step to your right, please.” Gritting our teeth, we entered our largest room with the longest line yet. All of us are waiting for the elevator that takes us the last six floors.

Loree and I are now beyond grumpy. After half a day in line, we’ve seen nothing but halls, rooms, and one elevator. If we knew this up front, we would have skipped it. But finally at the top, the view was breath-taking. We saw the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island partnered in the distance. The Chrysler Building glistens in the sun as Central Park rests peacefully amidst the skyscrapers.

Earlier when walking the sidewalks of New York City, Loree and I felt pressured by the crowds, noise, and pace. But from our new view, everything seemed calm, pressure-free, almost simple.

Looking back, the journey to the top was harder and longer than expected. Many times Loree and I wanted to turn back. But after reaching the top, seeing what we saw, and experiencing what we experienced, Loree and I would go through it all again because the journey was worth it.

The opportunity to draw near to God. The gift of being able to rise above life and see it from His perspective. The resetting of our eyes, our heart-rate, and especially our peace and joy. All of these make any discomforts in fasting and prayer more than worth it.