

21 **DAYS**

PRAYER

&

FASTING



THE FACTORY

21 Days of Prayer and F(e)asting

Fasting has become a much forgotten practice in the church today, seen by many as a religious ritual best left to Old Testament times. And yet, when we turn to the New Testament, not only do we find our Savior fasting, we also see him speaking to his disciples with words that clearly convey the expectation that they too will engage in this spiritual discipline.

In Matthew 9:15-17, when a group comes to Jesus questioning why the Pharisees fast and the disciples of John the Baptist fast, but his disciples are not fasting, Jesus responds by saying, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, so both are preserved.” Translation: There will come a time when Jesus’ disciples will fast, but this old practice will be carried out with a renewed purpose. What had deteriorated into an empty ritual, performed with an eye toward manipulating God or impressing people, would be restored to its original intent – a gracious means of experiencing the power and the presence of God more fully.

God did not design fasting as a burden to be borne or a rule to be followed in an attempt to earn divine favor; rather, the intent was that in denying ourselves that which usually satisfies our appetites, we might turn instead to God – expressing our dependence on him, our desire for him, and our delight in him. In fasting, we deny physical food to the body that we might obtain spiritual food for the soul. It is a way to proclaim, “More than my flesh longs for food, my soul longs for you, O God!”

Physical fasting is meant to be a pathway to spiritual feasting.

The following pages are designed to accompany a twenty-one day fast, providing spiritual food to chew on during this undertaking. As you suppress your appetite for the things of earth, and prayerfully find nourishment in his life-giving Word, may God be pleased to draw you closer, grow you deeper, and give you glimpses of his glory that truly satisfy your soul.



Day One – Jesus Fasted

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” (Matthew 4:1-2 ESV)

Jesus, the perfect Son of God, fasted. Let that sink in for a moment. When we question what motive we have for fasting, the fact that the One we follow did so should be reason enough. And yet, why did our Savior choose to deny himself food? What was his motive? We know from the text that Jesus, as he begins his public ministry, is being led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil – the adversary who wants to disqualify him from the cross and derail God’s plan of salvation. A lot is riding on Jesus’ ability to withstand the onslaught of the evil one. It is clear that the devil has aimed his attack for a time when Jesus is physically weak and hungry. But here’s the beautiful irony: Satan comes to Jesus when he knows he has been fasting; but Jesus has been fasting because he knows that Satan is coming.

Fasting, for Jesus, was not an empty religious ritual, but a powerful weapon to lay hold of as he walked upon this earth. The self-denial that left him physically weak was a means of being spiritually strong. His time spent suppressing the desires of the flesh and drawing near to the presence of his Father prepared him to pursue the course that was set before him. As we follow in his footsteps, may we view fasting as a means of denying the physical that we might focus on the spiritual, seeking the face of our Father and gaining strength to walk the path he has set before us.

Reflection: What steps are you currently taking to grow stronger in your walk with God?



Day Two – Feast on the Word

“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Deuteronomy 8:3 ESV)

At the onset of his public ministry, while Jesus is fasting in the wilderness, the evil one comes to him and tries to tempt him to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into loaves of bread. In response, Jesus picks up the sword of the Spirit and uses it to slay Satan’s temptation. By quoting these very words from Deuteronomy, Jesus reminds us that the hunger we experience as we fast is not something we should seek to avoid or escape; rather, it is meant to lead us to feast on the Word of God.

During this period of time when you are striving to fast, rest assured that the temptation will come your way to either forsake your fast altogether or to indulge your appetite in some other way. Now, you probably won’t try to turn stones into bread, but you will likely be tempted to eat from other tables that the world sets before you.

You might find yourself being enticed to take the edge off your appetite through entertainment or through mindless social media; or perhaps you will be tempted to dull your hunger by shopping, surfing the internet, or by simply grabbing some more sleep. The options are endless, but the bottom line is that you will be tempted to turn anywhere but God’s Word. So resolve now, at the beginning of your fast, that when your stomach starts growling you will not turn to what the world sets before you, but that instead, you will run to the life giving Word of God. Let your hunger lead you to partake of true soul food!

Reflection: What “table” do you think you will be most tempted to turn to during your fast? Stop and pray that God would help you instead to pick up his Word and feed your soul.



Day Three – A Prayerful Practice

“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.” (Nehemiah 9:1-2 ESV)

If you read through the passages in the Bible that speak of fasting, you will see that this practice is almost always paired with prayer; especially prayers of personal confession. Prayer and fasting go hand in hand. This makes sense when you stop to think about it. We often find that as we humble ourselves before God, denying our flesh the food it demands, God helps us to see more clearly the sin that yet resides in our hearts. He might show us pockets of pride or give us glimpses of self-centeredness that we were blind to before. He may also reveal sins that have been a part of our heritage for generations. Prayer, then, is a means of expressing what God exposes through fasting. As we intentionally lift our eyes from our earthly appetites to focus on God and to draw near to Him, prayer helps us (in the words of Hebrews 12:1) to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely” so that we might “run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

As you draw near to God and he grants you a greater awareness of sin in your life, remember that the Spirit’s aim in uncovering sin is to lead you to conviction, not condemnation. These sins are meant to be confessed and laid at the cross, where Jesus paid for them in full, so that we can be cleansed of that which dims our view of God or dulls our affections for him.

Reflection: 1 John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

Set aside some time to talk with God, asking him to search your heart and reveal areas where there is a need for confession. Then ask God to help you not only admit those sins, but to turn away from them in true repentance.



Day Four – Confession for the Culture

“Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayers and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed and made confession to the Lord my God.” (Daniel 9:3-4a ESV)

If you were to turn to Daniel 9 and read the rest of the prayer that is recorded in this chapter (and please do!) you would find that fasting is not only an opportunity for personal confession, but also for confessing the sins of the nation as a whole. In his prayer to God, Daniel acknowledges specific ways that the people have rejected God’s rule and fallen short of his righteousness, and then he humbly pleads for God’s merciful intervention.

As you fast, may you follow Daniel’s example, confessing not only the sins of your own life that God brings to light, but also confessing before him the waywardness of the culture in which we live. Let your fasting lead you to be an intercessor for the nation, going before God and pleading for mercy; asking him to turn the hearts of the people back to himself. Pray that the gospel would go forth with power; pray for those in positions of authority, that they would lead in righteousness; and pray for the church, that we would be people who don’t merely profess God with our lips but who honor him with our lives, being lights that shine in the midst of the darkness.

May your fasting be a time to not only reflect on the personal purity of your own heart, but to also bow before God and humbly pray for a mighty cleansing to take place in the land in which we live.

Reflection: Take a moment and truly lift up our nation to God. Get specific in your confession of the sins of the culture, not standing back as a self-righteous accuser, but as one who is also in need of cleansing.



Day Five – Declaration of Dependence

“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, ‘The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.’ So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.” (Ezra 8:21-24 ESV)

These verses were penned during a period in history when God’s people were returning to their homeland after having been exiled for the better part of a century.

Their exile had been the result of their persistent rebellion against God and their refusal to turn from trusting in their idols. Now, God was bringing them back to their land and granting them the task of restoring his Temple. Ezra, a scribe known for being one who both studied and obeyed the Law of the Lord, was sent to accompany the returning Israelites and to teach them God’s Word and God’s ways. Rather than asking the king to provide them with protection for their journey, Ezra proclaimed a fast, calling the people to humble themselves before God and to seek from his hand safety for their journey.

In calling for a fast, Ezra reminds us that one purpose of this practice is to provide us with an opportunity to humbly acknowledge our own insufficiency and look instead to God’s all-sufficiency. It gives us a chance to examine ourselves and confess where we are prone to look to other places or other people for help instead of turning to God and trusting in him. Fasting gives us an occasion to declare our absolute dependence on God, and to exalt Him as being a good Father who faithfully takes care of the needs of his children. In fasting, we renounce our self-reliance and place our trust instead on our God who bids us to bring him honor and glory by seeking our help from his hand.

Reflection: Where have you been seeking help from the world instead of from the hand of your Father?



Day Six: Depending, Not Demanding

“Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord.” (2 Chronicles 20:3-4 ESV)

In this passage, the king of Judah has just learned that three enemy nations have joined forces against him, and he is afraid. Rather than quickly coming up with some sort of plan or strategy of his own design, he calls the people of the land to humble themselves – to fast and seek help from the Lord. Jehoshaphat then goes before God in prayer, expressing his confidence in God’s character and his trust in God’s promises, concluding with these words – “For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” Jehoshaphat doesn’t come demanding or dictating to God what he should do, nor does he offer God advice on the best way to intervene, he simply presents himself before the Lord, declaring his dependence on him and seeking help from him.

As we walk through life, we will doubtless encounter circumstances that seem overwhelming to us; situations that are beyond our own wisdom to solve and our own strength to battle. Fasting is one way we can humble ourselves before God and express our need for him. It is a time to recall God’s unchanging character and to remind ourselves of his unshakable promises. It is an opportunity to stop trying to take care of ourselves with our own resources and turn to the one who has pledged to be our protector and provider. Fasting is a time when we can set our face to seek help from the Lord our God.

Reflection: Is there a situation in your life that you have been trying to handle in your own strength? Use your time of fasting to give this over to God, echoing the words of the king of Judah – “I do not know what to do, but my eyes are on you.”



Day Seven – A New Obsession

“Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.” (Hebrews 13:9 ESV)

We live in a culture that, by and large, is obsessed with food. At times, this obsession takes the form of indulgence; seeing food as a source of pleasure and entertainment, with our thoughts continually being drawn to what we will eat, where we will eat it, and who we will eat it with. Weekend plans revolve around which restaurant we will visit and what mouth-watering item is on its menu. Other times, our food fixation is revealed as we adopt carefully regimented restrictions with an eye toward physical health and fitness. One month we are nibbling like rabbits, while the next month finds us imitating the culinary habits of cavemen. If we're not careful, food can even become our focus during fasting, tempting us to view this practice as more of a diet than a spiritual discipline with the goal of losing weight surpassing the goal of gaining God.

Although we give great attention to what we feed (or don't feed) our bodies, we often give little consideration to what we are feeding our souls. Fasting is an ideal time to lay aside our preoccupation with food and focus instead on giving nourishment to our inner man. One specific way to do this is to strengthen our hearts by contemplating the past, present, and future grace of God. Take some time to get alone with your Father and purposefully recall the grace that reached out and took hold of you, turning a rebel into a dearly loved child. Then thank him for the grace that he is lavishing on you in the midst of your current circumstances, sustaining you and supplying you with all that you need to walk in a manner that honors him. And finally, give God thanks in advance for the grace that is promised you for the future. There will never come a time when his fountain of grace will run dry.

May your fasting lead you to a place where food is no longer your obsession, but instead, you are captivated with the abundant grace of our amazing God.

Reflection: In what ways has God been gracious to you in the past? How do you see him giving grace in the present? Now go ahead and praise him for the grace that he will give in the days ahead.



Day Eight: A Pleasure-Giving God

*"You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine
abound."*

(Psalm 4:7 ESV)

Our God is a giver of good gifts. He is a gracious Father who delights to bless his children and who has abundantly provided us with pleasures to experience in our lives, with one of those pleasures being food. Did you ever consider that God could have made food boring and bland? Have you ever stopped to think of how wonderful it is that God created us with taste buds so we could savor the flavors we are putting in our mouths? God chose to design things such that the food that we eat not only gives strength to our bodies, but also gives gladness to our hearts. Dining can indeed be delightful.

But the joy we find in food is but a shadow of the joy we are meant to experience in Jesus, the true bread from Heaven. The physical food that satisfies our bodies can't compare with the way that God satisfies our souls. David expressed this reality in Psalm 4 saying that the joy others experienced when their grain and wine were in abundance paled in comparison to the joy he experienced in the presence of God. Fasting is a time when we voluntarily abstain from the fleeting pleasures that food brings so that we can feast our souls on the glories of God, finding in him a truer and more lasting satisfaction.

May your time of fasting lead you to linger in the presence of God so that you can say with certainty, "in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Reflection: What does it tell you about the character of God that He chose to make the food we eat not only a means of strengthening our bodies, but also a source of gladness to our hearts?

Day Nine – False Fasting

“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.” (Isaiah 58:3 ESV)

In Isaiah 58 (you really want to read this whole chapter!) God is confronting his people who desire his blessing and favor over their own lives, but who don’t want to be instruments of his blessing in the lives of those around them. They want God to see the external acts they perform – like fasting, tithing, and keeping the Sabbath – and be impressed enough to shower them with good gifts, all the while hoping that he will turn a blind eye to the way they live the rest of their lives. But God is not impressed with empty ritual, and God is not pleased with outward actions that fail to flow from hearts that love him and long to be like him.

As we fast, we want to be cautious that this same tendency doesn’t take root in our own lives. We don’t want fasting to turn into a religious rule we keep, in effect, saying to God, “Look at me. See what a good person I am? I am honoring you, and in return, you should honor me.” Because the tendency of the human heart is to be self-centered, it is oh so easy to make our fasting more about us than it is about God. We might not state it so blatantly, but if we are not careful and prayerful, we can treat our fast as if it were a magic lamp we rub in order to coerce genie Jesus into granting our every wish. But fasting was never intended to be a religious ritual performed to get God to give us more of his gifts; rather, it is a means of grace God has extended to us that he might give us more of himself.

Reflection: Take a moment to honestly search your heart. In your fasting, are you hungering for more of God or more of his gifts?



Day Ten – Motive Matters

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.” (Matthew 6:1,16 ESV)

“Beware” – a word that usually warns us of potential danger – is spoken here by Jesus as he urges us to take heed lest we end up doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons. In this case, he warns us not to parade our spiritual practices before others in an attempt to gain the praise of man, and specifically, not to fast with an eye toward impressing those around us. In a culture that craves attention and applause, the temptation to broadcast our “acts of righteousness” can be great, even when that broadcasting is simply dropping subtle statements about how hungry we are with the hopes that this will pave the way to share the fact that we are fasting. It is human nature to want others to think highly of us, but if the reward we seek is the approval of others, that may very well be the reward we get, and although the taste may be momentarily sweet, in the end it will leave us empty and unsatisfied.

Fasting provides us with a perfect opportunity to lay aside our addiction to the approval of others and to quietly focus on God, resting and rejoicing in his approval of us. Rather than calling attention to ourselves when we fast, it is a time when we can call out to God and ask him to open our eyes to see Him more clearly, to open our hearts to love him more deeply, and to open our lips to declare his praises rather than to seek praises for ourselves. Instead of feeding our desire to be esteemed by others, fasting is a means of finding in God that which will truly fulfill our souls.

Reflection: In your everyday life, how strong would you say your desire is for the approval of others? Would it be hard for you to serve or give if it was only seen by God?



Day Eleven – The Reward of Fasting

“But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:17-18 ESV)

We have already seen that when it comes to fasting (and anything else in life) motives matter to our God. He cares not only that we do the right things, but that we do them with a right heart. The purpose of our fasting cannot be to gain the praise and approval of those around us, nor can it be performed as a means to manipulate God, as if our fasting somehow obligates him to bless us in whatever ways we think are best. God will not honor fasting that is done to impress people; nor will he be treated like a vending machine, where we insert the coin of fasting and expect to be entitled to whatever blessing we choose.

But when our fasting flows from a right heart and is carried out with right motives we can expect to receive reward from God. It might be that as we humble ourselves before our Father through times of fasting, that He rewards us with victory over a sin struggle in our lives. Or it may be that we experience an answer to prayer or are granted greater clarity and direction in an area where we need guidance. It could also be that we see God provide for us or open up new opportunities to us. Or it may be (and this would be the greatest reward of all!) that God opens our eyes to see Him more clearly and gives us soul-satisfying glimpses of his glory. Ultimately, when we seek God through fasting, we can trust that God will reward us in the ways that he knows are best and we can be assured that the greatest reward he can give us is more of himself.

Reflection: Rather than dictating to God how he should reward you, take a moment and pray that God would purify your motives in fasting and bless you in the ways that he knows are best.



Day Twelve – Spiritual Fitness

“For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and for the life to come.” (1 Timothy 4:8ESV)

If you want to become physically fit, you know that it will take discipline. You will have to exercise to strengthen your muscles, even to the point of producing a little sweat and discomfort. The saying, “No pain, no gain” rings true. You also need to choose your foods wisely, to both decrease your weight and increase your energy. Getting in good shape simply doesn’t happen by eating donuts and watching exercise videos; it requires effort and intention. The same can be said for spiritual fitness; it is not something that happens accidentally and without discipline.

In the Christian culture, we sometimes get uncomfortable with the word discipline for fear that we will fall into a mindset of legalism. Because we want to celebrate grace and avoid the error of becoming religious rule-keepers, we get uneasy talking about anything that feels like something we are obliged to do if we want to be stronger in our walk with God. And yet, the spiritual disciplines (like fasting, tithing, studying Scripture, and praying) are not meant to be performed to gain God’s approval or to display our personal righteousness; they are various means of grace given to us by our God so that we can experience a deeper, healthier, and more stable walk with him. They are a gift to us from a Father who knows that slipping away from him comes naturally, but abiding in him requires effort. Fasting is a discipline designed not so we can wear the label of “good Christian” but so that we can be a more spiritually fit follower of Jesus. Fasting is simply one tool God has given us to help us sink our roots more deeply into him, and in doing so, to bear fruit in our lives that demonstrates that we are his disciples.

Reflection: Would you say that you place a greater emphasis on physical fitness or on spiritual fitness? What is one “discipline” you could add to your life to help you grow stronger in your walk with God?



Day Thirteen: An Empty Bucket Mentality

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:3-8 ESV)

We live in a “fill-me-up” kind of culture; one that encourages us to pursue our own interests, to satisfy our own ambitions, and to indulge in whatever we believe will bring us the most satisfaction in life. In this day and age, bucket lists are all the rage; lists that are filled with the places we want to go, the goals we want to accomplish, and the things we want to experience before our days on earth are done. These bucket lists represent those things that we believe will somehow signify a life well-lived.

But what if a life well-lived is one that follows in the footsteps of Jesus? What if true fulfillment is not found in consuming and accumulating things for ourselves, but in emptying ourselves and looking to the interests of others? Fasting is a practice that can help us nurture such a mindset. It is a chance to turn aside from our own self-interests and consider instead the needs of those around us. Rather than focusing on when our next meal will be served, fasting provides us with the perfect opportunity to think about how we can bless and serve others. The self-denial that takes place as we purposely limit what we normally consume can be a tool in the hand of God to help conform us to the character of his Son. As we intentionally lift our eyes from our own appetites, we are more apt to notice the needs of those around us. Then, when our days on earth are done, perhaps we will not have a bucket filled with earthly pleasures and treasures to present to our Savior, but an empty bucket that has been poured out to enrich the lives of others.

Reflection: As you continue your fast, ask God to show you a practical way that you can be a blessing to someone else. your life to help you grow stronger in your walk with God?



Day Fourteen: Fasting with a Focus

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’ And so he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.” (Exodus 34:27-29 ESV)

For forty days Moses had been meeting with God – experiencing his presence, receiving instruction, and hearing him speak – and during this time, the prophet neither ate bread nor drank water. The Scripture doesn’t indicate that this fast was commanded by God; rather, it seems as if while on the mountain communicating with his Creator, the allure of the physical simply faded in the midst of such an intimate encounter. Moses wanted to hear from God more than he wanted to fill his stomach. And really, who stops to snack when God’s voice is speaking directly to you? And when the forty days were finished and Moses came back down from the mountain, he was a changed man. His very countenance was transformed, giving clear evidence that he had been in the presence of the Lord.

Although you likely don’t have the luxury of disappearing to the mountains for a month, your time of fasting is still an opportunity to intentionally give undivided attention to the God who created you and who called you into relationship with himself. Don’t waste your fasting by being preoccupied with trivial distractions and failing to truly carve out time to be with God. Just as God had words to share with Moses, he has words to share with you – words that if you trust them and take them to heart, can change your very countenance.

Reflection: Is it easy or hard for you to believe that the same God who spoke to Moses is able and willing to speak to you?



Day Fifteen: Lips that Praise and Ears that Listen

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:3-4 ESV)

Lips that praise and ears that listen – these are two things that should always accompany a time of fasting. In the verses above, we find a group of men from the church at Antioch worshipping God as they physically fast. These men aren’t sitting around complaining about how hungry they are or counting down the days until they can once again engage in a decadent dessert; nor are they subtly boasting of the sacrifice they are making by denying themselves food. Instead, their time of fasting is spent pouring forth praises to the Lord, with their ears receptive to what he might have to say. And as they worship and pray and listen, God speaks to them and directs them in the way he would have them go.

Many Christians who have engaged in a time of personal fasting can testify to this same kind of experience occurring in their own lives. It’s not that fasting obligates God to show up, or that our praises are like some magic potion that compels him to speak to us; rather, worshipping and fasting places us in a posture where we are better positioned to hear from God. As we shift our focus away from the food that our body desires and instead declare to God that what we most desire is to walk with him, we will find that we are much more in tune with what he might have to say to us. Fasting is an ideal time to worship God with the words of our mouth and then quiet our souls saying, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Reflection: Take some time to offer genuine praise to God, and then pray that he would give you a listening ear to hear him speak.



Day Sixteen: The Meal of Ministry

“Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Has anyone brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.’” (John 4:31-34 ESV)

What comes to mind when you think of food? Something simple like bread and cheese? Something hearty like steak and potatoes? Or perhaps something more refined like caviar? Whatever you think of first, odds are good it is something physical and tangible; something you can savor and sink your teeth into that would give you some measure of sustenance. Isn't it interesting in the verses above (which are taken from the familiar passage where Jesus has been ministering to the Samaritan woman at the well) that when Jesus' disciples bring up the topic of food and urge their Rabbi to eat, he takes that opportunity to teach them. He uses the moment to help them see the truth that feeding people spiritually matters more than filling their own stomachs and that accomplishing God's purposes for their lives takes precedence over what their next meal would be. Jesus shows them that there is true nourishment to be gained from walking in God's ways and accomplishing his work.

Now we know that Jesus was not opposed to eating and drinking; on the contrary, he enjoyed a good feast to the extent that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (Don't take my word for it, check out Matthew 11:19!). And we also know that he didn't spend his days on earth imposing harsh restrictions on people, one of the very things he condemned in the religious leaders of the day. But he did want his followers to have a right perspective and to embrace the same priorities that he did – loving God and caring for the needs of those created in his image.

Fasting is a perfect time to purposely and prayerfully realign your life with God's passions and priorities and to ask him what he wants to accomplish in you and through you in this season of your life.

Reflection: During this time when you are denying yourself some measure of physical food, is there anyone God has placed in your path that you can intentionally share spiritual food with?



Day Seventeen: An Invitation to Intimacy

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.” (Isaiah 55:1-3a ESV)

In the passage above, God calls out to hungry people and bids them to come and eat; he calls out to thirsty people and bids them to come and drink. He urges them, though they are poor and needy and have nothing to bring to the table, to come and satisfy their hunger and their thirst and to freely partake of a feast. But although God uses the imagery of bread, and wine, and milk, the invitation he extends to them is not to a physical feast but to a spiritual feast; to come into his presence and listen to the words he speaks that they might find true soul satisfaction. Three times he bids them to listen diligently to him, to incline their ear to him, and to draw near and hear him and in so doing, to delight themselves in life-giving, soul-nourishing food. God speaks and invites them to experience intimacy with himself.

If we fast wisely, we will not merely turn away from the foods we typically eat, but we will turn toward God and listen to him speak from His Word. We will forsake our pride and self-sufficiency and come before him in all our neediness, ready to receive from all his fullness. We will come humbly yet boldly to the banquet he sets before us, knowing that we could never earn such a feast, but assured that our Savior has paid the full price so that we might partake freely. If we use our time of fasting wisely, it will become a time of feasting on the excellencies of God, who delights to reveal himself to us as the One who truly satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst.

Reflection: When you look at your intake of God’s Word, would you say that you neglect it, nibble at it, or truly nourish your soul with it?



Day Eighteen: A Satisfying Portion

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (Psalm 73:25-26 ESV)

We live in a culture that continually turns to earthly pleasures and worldly treasures in search of satisfaction. The message and mantra that surrounds us is that more is better, that new is necessary, and that we should pursue and indulge in whatever we believe will make us happy. But when we seek from created things what can only be found in the Creator, we are left empty and unsatisfied. The stuff of earth, though often enjoyable, was never meant to be the source of our true and lasting joy.

Accumulating possessions and pursuing pleasurable experiences may dull our appetite, but will never satisfy our deepest hunger. God created us in such a way that he alone can fulfill us; anything less will ultimately fail us.

One of the benefits of fasting is that it provides us with a time to purposefully pause and remind ourselves not to get caught up in the current of the culture or to buy the lie that adding more “stuff” to our lives will somehow satisfy our longings. As we intentionally limit the types and portions of food that we eat, it is an ideal opportunity to reflect on the truth that God himself is the only portion that will satisfy the true hunger of our souls. Fasting is a time to declare to our Creator that, whether we know it or not, there really is nothing on earth we desire besides him.

Reflection: Take an honest look at your life. Would you say that you have an accumulation addiction? Do you routinely seek satisfaction from material things?



Day Nineteen: Unshakable Joy in Undesirable Conditions

“Though the fig trees should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” (Habakkuk 3:17-18 ESV)

The prophet Habakkuk wrote when God’s people of the past were facing some bleak times; times marked by loss, lack, and adversity. These are words that we don’t like to have associated with our lives. Our preference is to live in a land of plenty and to spend our days in prosperity. It is human nature to crave comfort and to desire ease. And when difficulties do come and hard times hit, our tendency can be to complain about our circumstances and to grumble about our lot in life. Times of deprivation, if we are not careful, can lead us down a road of despair where we doubt God’s goodness and lose sight of God’s grace. Difficult times can easily rob us of the joy we so desperately desire. Yet, in the verses above, the prophet reminds us that it is possible to have unshakable joy even in the midst of undesirable circumstances, provided that joy is rooted and grounded in the unchanging character of a sovereign, saving God.

All of us will face “famine” of one sort or another in our lives; when we do, will we let our praise wither and our self-pity grow? Fasting is a spiritual discipline that can help prepare us for the battles that inevitably lie ahead. As we voluntarily deprive ourselves of something that we desire and willingly subject ourselves to a measure of lack, we remind ourselves that true joy is not found in a trial-free life, but rather in knowing and having relationship with the living God. When our stomachs grumble, it is a chance to lift our eyes in gratefulness that although our circumstances may at times be difficult, our deepest desires are only satisfied by the grace and the goodness of our infinite God.

Reflection: Would you say that your joy is tied more to your circumstances or to your relationship with God?



Day Twenty: Contemplate and Cultivate

“My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” (Psalm 63:5-8 ESV)

As our bodies are meant to be strengthened and satisfied by eating food, so our souls are meant to be strengthened and satisfied by knowing God. In our innermost being we know this to be true and would readily confess that God alone is the answer to our longing for fulfillment, but the question remains, how can this move from being an empty truth to which we give mere mental assent to a genuine reality that we experience in our everyday lives? If we were to ask David, the author of Psalm 63, to offer us some advice, the words “contemplate” and “cultivate” might proceed from his mouth. You can see this in the verses above. If we purposefully take time to be still and contemplate the greatness and the goodness of God, meditating on His perfections and remembering the countless ways he has been our help, and if we cultivate closeness with him, listening to him speak to us and offering up our praises to him, relinquishing our grip on worldly trinkets and holding tightly to the One who holds tightly to us, then we will find ourselves on the road to experiencing a satisfied soul.

In fasting, we abstain in order to obtain – denying the body the food it craves while feeding the soul what it was created to enjoy. As we restrain from indulging in our normal intake of food, it is with the hopes that we will take time to contemplate the glories of God and to cultivate closeness with the One who intricately created us, who intimately knows us, and who alone is able to minister to our deepest longings.

Reflection: As you contemplate the greatness and the goodness of God, what is one nourishing truth you can meditate on to feed your soul?



Day Twenty One: To Be with the Bridegroom

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.’” (Mark 2:19-20 ESV)

When we become Christians we become united to Jesus and his Spirit now dwells within us. No longer separated from him, we are now able to live our days walking in close relationship with him, witnessing his power and experiencing his presence in real and meaningful ways. And yet, we know that what we experience now pales in comparison with what awaits. This side of heaven, we settle for tastes and glimpses that merely whet the appetite for what lies ahead. Jesus has promised us that there will be a day when we will be with him, and that we will know a fullness of joy that we can't even begin to fathom while our feet are still planted on this earth. Our bridegroom has promised that he will either return for us or send for us so that we can receive the glorious inheritance that is being guarded for us.

There are many motives for fasting, but one that is often neglected is that we fast to declare our longing to be with our bridegroom. In fasting, we confess our desire for our Savior to come and sweep away all sin and sadness, to obliterate the brokenness that permeates our lives, and to draw us into a relationship with him that is rich beyond our imagination. In fasting, we proclaim that nothing this world offers us can satisfy the deepest places of our souls, and we express that we are eagerly awaiting the day when what is temporary is swallowed up by what is eternal. Fasting is a means of stirring up within us a holy hunger for the unhindered fellowship with God that we were created to enjoy and are promised that we will one day experience.

Reflection: As you end your 21 days of fasting, take some time for a little extra reflection. How has your life been blessed through this discipline? Are you more aware of your dependence on God, your desire for God, or your delight in God? Was it easy or difficult for you to fast with right motives? Would you say that your time of fasting helped to stir within you a holy hunger for a deeper and closer walk with God?



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