

## FASTING CHALLENGE

By Penn Clark

Sometimes the only way to break a habit is to go on a fast. It can be a powerful way to break off the influences of both demons and the pull of our flesh.

The Bible says things like fasting “chastens our flesh” or “humbles our flesh”. Both are often needed to break the power our flesh has gained over our spiritual lives. The Psalmist said, *“I humbled myself with fasting...”* (Psalms 35:13-14). Remember, God gives grace to the humble. If you need more grace right now, then I would suggest you begin by fasting for three full days. Then over the next few weeks, try a twenty-four hour fast once a week, or a daily sixteen-hour fast, which involves not eating after dinner and missing breakfast.

I also suggest you go on a media fast, like television, movies and magazines, social media, digital games -- anything that has taken control over your life. If you are a news-junkie, you will need to cut back to reading only the headlines for a while. This will help you become more sensitive spiritually, allowing you to hear from the Lord and begin to feel His presence again. *“Now the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; and no musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep went from him.”* (Daniel 6:18) The musicians were nightly “entertainment” of kings, so it was something he fasted.

It should go without saying, but you must abstain from all porn during this challenge. You should abstain from masturbation as well.

Write out what you want to accomplish by fasting – becoming clean, godly, more spiritually fit and free – whatever it is, you will need to set it before you whenever you are tempted to give yourself to your flesh. Simply compare the food you are craving to the desire you have set before you, and it will help you stay on course. Another thing that will strengthen your desire to fast is to read stories from the Bible of how someone fasted and had a breakthrough.

As far as it is possible, keep your fasting objectives between you and the Lord. The only deviation I make is that I will tell people I will be missing some meals in order to be considerate of those who are preparing meals. I will also do it in order to invite others to fast with me, or to ensure someone that I am fasting for them.

Take time before hand to consider how you will fast. Will it be one meal a day, or no food over several weeks? Will it be a complete foodless fast with only water, or a partial fast, abstaining from certain foods?

I suggest you give up all sugar – energy drinks, soda, processed food, during this time. If you are going to eat, keep it simple, like hearty soups – which provide something for the soul as well. You will find that you will feel better and have more energy to give yourself to this challenge. All of this will add much needed discipline to your life.

During your fast, restrict what physical or social activities you will participate in. It would be good to restrict how much time you will spend with friends and how much strenuous labor you will do.

I recommend that you put yourself in a place where God can speak to you, like exposing your heart to God's Word or reading a good book that contains vision. If possible, take a break from your previous routines of the day and spend more time talking aloud with the Lord.

Here are my (unedited) notes about fasting. I hope they inspire you in your quest for freedom.

*With every blessing, Penn*

## FREEDOMS FROM FASTING

There are five basic disciplines embraced by all Christians. While there are others, these have been the primary focus of disciples from the beginning. They are: giving, prayer, fasting, study or meditation, and rest. Let me begin by saying the best one to start with is giving as all the others spring from a heart conditioned to give. If we pray, fast, and study for the benefit of others, it turns on the taps of grace. If we do these things just for our own benefit, they will not flow as easily. I have also found the most difficult discipline of the five is the last one, rest. If we get that one right, the others will be much easier to do. It is nearly impossible to be spiritual and exhausted at the same time.

I call these disciplines because they are not required of us as commandments. Doing them or not doing them doesn't make us more eligible to go to heaven. In fact, many believers neglect to do them, at least with any consistency. However, if we do them, they make us more effective, enhance our spiritual lives, make us more sensitive to God, and help us remain free and able to bring freedom to others.

Jesus majored in each of these, and if we are to become like Him, we must do the same. Remember, the goal of a disciple is to do what Jesus did to become what He became.

## THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

Jesus was committed to fasting and taught His disciples how to fast for the right reasons. John the Baptist fasted often, which caused his disciples to do the same. The Pharisees fasted at least twice a week, so their disciples did the same. This illustrates the idea that disciples need to do what their masters (teachers) did in order to become what they became.

The scribes and Pharisees noticed that Jesus' disciples didn't fast. They asked Him, *"Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?"* (Luke 5:33)

Even the disciples of John were a bit miffed by this. They came to Him and asked, *"Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"* And Jesus said to them, *"Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."* (Matthew 9:14-15)

Jesus explained that it was simply a timing issue, not a lack of willingness on their part. Discerning the right season to fast isn't always easy, even for disciples today, but His disciples understood the time was approaching when they would fast.

The second thing Jesus addressed was the reason His disciples should fast. For Him, motive is everything. The fact that the disciples of John and the Pharisees were upset at His disciples revealed something about their motivation. Legalism always condemns others for not doing what

the legalists feel obligated to do. They were essentially saying, “If we *have* to do this, then you have to as well.”

Anytime we approach the disciplines as a commandment, it can lead to self-righteousness or legalism as that expressed by the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-13:

*The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!”*

Fasting can become a slippery slope unless it remains within the framework of grace. We don’t *have* to do it; we *get* to do it. If you approach it this way, you will be so excited about fasting that you will be preparing for the next fast while you are finishing your current one. If you don’t have a passion for it, it’s likely you don’t understand it or understand the great benefits from doing it. You will need to ask Jesus to teach you what motivated Him to fast so often and with such freedom.

#### REWARDS FOR FASTING

As with all the other disciplines, Jesus taught there were rewards for fasting. These rewards help stimulate our desire:

*“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that you do not appear unto men to fast, but unto your Father, which is done in secret: and your Father which sees in secret shall reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:16-18)*

He pointed out the fact that some people fasted so they could appear more spiritual to others. That was the reward they were seeking, and Jesus said that was the reward they would get. They somehow knew fasting could lead to a deep sense of spirituality. The fact is, Jesus and John the Baptist both fasted extensively and had developed a deep spirituality, so there is a connection between the two. However, the hypocrites were satisfied with the “appearance of spirituality.” It fueled their desire. Their motivation to fast had become hijacked by their flesh, which always longs for the applause and approval of men.

Jesus taught there was something higher, something more satisfying, something truly worth mastering this discipline for—*the approval and honor of the Father*. That was what moved Jesus to fast. He did it to enter into the Father’s pleasure, which is a beautiful motivation for fasting.

#### REASONS TO FAST

When we fast in secret, God will reward us openly. What are these rewards? I don’t think there are any limits on this. However, God never rewards selfishness. It would be best to

choose a reward that would benefit the lives of those around you, which springs from the desire to give.

- Fast so you become more sensitive in the Spirit, helping you minister to others more effectively.
- Fast so you can break bondages or habits in your life or in the lives of those you care for.
- Fast so you build your life around eternal priorities rather than the demanding dictates of your flesh.
- Fast so you have better health, allowing you to serve the Lord more effectively.
- Fast so your friends and family can come into what God has for them.

### PREDETERMINE YOUR OBJECTIVES

It works best if you start a fast with a predetermined goal in mind. Take time beforehand to consider how long you will fast. Will it be one meal, one day, a week, several weeks, or forty days? Will it be a complete foodless fast with only water and juices, or a partial fast consisting of only certain kinds of food? Once you have chosen what to do, stick with it. Then, when you are tempted to eat something, compare it to the reward you are expecting. When tempted to break a fast, I often tell myself, "I can eat that anytime, but I want this thing more!"

According to what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:16-18, you can predetermine the reward you want for fasting. Doing this before you start will help ensure your desire to fast is stronger than your desire to eat. What is the reward you want? Here are some suggestions:

- To take control of your flesh.
- To come into personal revival.
- To receive specific guidance.
- To increase your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.
- To break a habit or persistent sin.
- To see provision for someone else in need.

### KEEPING YOUR FASTING A SECRET

As far as it is possible, keep your objectives between you and the Lord. The only exceptions I make are when I invite people to fast with me, or to let someone know I am standing with them in their trial. I will also be considerate enough to let those who are preparing meals for me know that I will not be eating.

Jesus taught that we should do our fasting for our Father's eyes only, or risk losing the reward we are fasting for (Matthew 6:16-18).

When He taught this, He was warning the disciples that if they fasted like the Pharisees did, drawing attention to themselves by looking thin and gaunt, sad and sanctified, they would not receive any benefit from their fast other than the applause of those who like this kind of hypocrisy.

This warning about having the right motivation for these disciplines has caused some sincere people to take this concept to an extreme in the other direction by being secretive or strangely vague about their fasting, refusing even to mention that they are fasting at all. This practice has inadvertently drawn even more attention to themselves.

Is it wrong to talk about our experience with fasting? Is it wrong to let others know we are fasting? While Jesus taught this concept, He told His disciples about how He had fasted forty days in the wilderness. Otherwise, how would they have known about this period of His life? He was completely alone in the wilderness, right? He must have told them as they walked and talked together.

How do we know that John the Baptist fasted often? He lived a life of continual fasting by limiting himself to eating only locust and honey. Others must have observed this, or he must have shared details about it with others, right?

How do we know that Paul fasted and prayed often? Because he talked about this in 2 Corinthians 6:5 and in 2 Corinthians 11:27.

For that matter, how do we know that Moses fasted water and food for eighty days? How do we know Daniel fasted for twenty-one days? They told others and wrote about it themselves.

There is a time and place to talk about our experiences with fasting, but motives matter. If we do it to draw attention to ourselves, we could lose the approval of the Father. If it is a matter of teaching, training, leading others into it or helping them understand how to do it and how it works, then we are allowed to do so without the risk of forfeiting favor, rewards, or benefits. It is also considerate to let people know that you will be fasting, so they can plan meals accordingly, or to graciously decline a meal by letting them know you are not eating.

The same principle applies to praying and giving. How do we know that Cornelius the centurion had been praying and giving alms? Because the Bible tells us (Acts 10:1-4). How do we know Jesus prayed often and was inclined to give to the poor? Because we are told about it (John 13:29).

Let's be mature Christians and keep out of the ditches on both sides of the road. Amen!

Finally, Jesus taught that we should be careful about telling people that we are fasting, so we don't lose our reward in the process. Again, this helps prevent our flesh from hijacking the fast. However, I feel it is all right to let people know that I plan to miss some meals out of consideration for those who are preparing the food. Neither do I think it violates what Jesus taught to let people know that I am not eating with them for a reason. I keep it simple and discrete, without drawing

undue attention to the fact that I am fasting. When I lead our church into a time of fasting it requires that I communicate more about why and when I am fasting. If I keep my motives are right, I am free to do this without any fear of losing my reward.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### **Q. Why do I feel sad during a fast?**

**A.** Some people say they feel sad or down when they fast, which can be harder on our souls than not eating. These feelings are part of it and can actually be a good thing if you use them to draw closer to the Lord. It may be the kind of mourning the Lord was talking through Joel in Joel 2:12-13:

*"Now, therefore," says the Lord, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm."*

Fasting is also a good time to turn to the Lord and repent of anything that comes to mind.

### **Q. Why do I feel so weak when I fast?**

**A.** Fasting makes me feel weak on a number of levels, which is not something I naturally prefer, but I beginning to see the spiritual benefits of it. Rather than resisting and resenting it, I am learning to embrace it. If I use it, right, it can lead me to be more dependent upon Him, needier, and more sensitive in spirit. All of this can result in more power and grace. Perhaps this is why John the Baptist fasted often and intentionally limited himself to eating locust and honey, even thought he had a "congregation" of millions. What if he had become addicted to a weakened condition that God is so attracted to?

### **Q. What to do during the fast?**

**A.** During your fast, decide what physical or social activities you need to restrict. For example, I recommend that you stay away from television during the fast. (The commercials alone can work against you) It would be good to restrict how much time you will spend with friends and how much strenuous labor you will do.

Fasting television, your phone, or the internet will help us all become more sensitive to what the Spirit wants to do in and through you.

The king did something like this in Daniel 6:18 *"Now the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; and no musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep went from him."* The musicians were the nightly entertainment that the king was used to.

How much time each day will you devote to prayer and exposing your heart to God's Word? This puts you in a place where God can speak to you. If possible, take a break from the routine of

your day and spend more time before the Lord. You will get more out of it if you combine fasting with prayer.

**Q. What to drink during the fast?**

**A.** Your body is likely used to three meal times a day. You can satisfy it by drinking water or a little juice. This stops the hunger pains and gives a natural sugar stimulus that can strengthen you as you fast. I have found that pure coconut water is the best thing to drink when I need a boost of energy. Drinks that contain more acid (orange juice and soda) will be harder on your system.

For me, pure coconut water (not milk) is the best thing to drink on a fast. Not only will it keep you hydrated, but it will give you energy without all the sugar.

I also continue drinking moderate amounts of coffee or tea. My body is used to having these each day and I don't want to be fighting a headache along with all the other distractions I will face. My thinking is "One battle at a time".

**Q. What is the best way to break a fast?**

**A.** Breaking your fast can affect your physical and spiritual well-being. If for some reason you cannot keep your original commitment, you may have to deal with some condemnation or disappointment with yourself. To reduce this, begin talking to the Lord about your intentions and the reasons for stopping. Just be honest with Him. Realize that any attempt to fast is still worthwhile and will bear fruit.

Don't break your fast by eating all the foods you were tempted to eat while you were fasting. It is best to break a fast with something simple like toast and eggs or oatmeal. Soups are also a good way to re-introduce food to your system. It is always better to start with smaller portions and gradually add a few snacks throughout the day. If you eat rich or heavy foods immediately, you will get diarrhea. Even worse, you might lose all the spiritual sensitivity you gained. Avoid sugary foods like candy and desserts during this time. By ending your fast gradually, you can continue to experience the benefits of self-control.

**QUICK TIPS ABOUT FASTING**

- At the beginning of the fast, try to read a story from the Bible that illustrates how someone fasted and had a breakthrough that benefited others. This will stoke your desire to fast.
- A typical Jewish fast was from one evening meal to next, which is the easiest way to fast.
- Perhaps the most beneficial short fast may be starting after dinner one day, not eating all the next day, then breaking the fast with breakfast the following day.



- Drink moderately so you are not filling yourself up with liquids. If all you are doing is trying to make yourself feel hungry then perhaps you are missing the point of fasting.
- The fast is not just from the food itself but from the comfort our soul gets from eating.
- If you have too many sweet beverages, gum or candy, it will be harder to fast. Sugar can stimulate your appetite.
- I still drink coffee when I fast but you will have to see how it affects you.
- Usually, by the end day of fasting you find that you are not hungry at all.
- You will get the hungriest around dinnertime. It may not be hungry but struggling with the force of habit. Once you get over this, it will be easier to fast.
- You will need the support and co-operation of your spouse. It may help you to tell them what your objectives are for fasting so they can help you achieve them.

#### CHANGING APPETITES

One of the things fasting does is help change our appetites. It is possible, to re-write the desire scripts that drive our lives, whether it is food, entertainment, or sex. The key to doing this is abstinence. Our flesh takes good things to an extreme, but by saying no to this lower nature, by abstaining, you are taking control away from it.

Part of your motivation for fasting should be to substitute food, or whatever you are fasting, for something else. For example, you can fast food and replace it with eating God's word.

Job discovered the words that came out of God's mouth were more fulfilling than the food he put in his:

*"My foot hath held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food."* (Job 23:11-12)

Have you found this to be true in your own life?

*"I have not refused His commandments but have enjoyed them more than my daily food."* (Job 23:11-12 Today's Living Bible)

David found His words to be sweeter than honey:

*"How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"* (Psalms 119:103)

He went on to say that he actually *loved* God's word. At the time, he only had access to the first five books of the Bible. I can understand someone loving Genesis and Exodus, but he was talking about loving Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

Do you love what you find in these books of the Bible?

*“Consider how I love Your precepts; Revive me, O Lord, according to Your lovingkindness.”* (Psalm 119:159)

He used a word for love the same way we use this word when we say we love a good hamburger. He even loved the precepts of God, which are the regulations or mandates that bring order to our lives.

Jeremiah found that eating God’s word brought joy and rejoicing to his heart:  
*“Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart...”* (Jeremiah 15:16)

The priority is to live not just by what we put in our mouths, but by what comes out of His:  
*“So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”* (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Whenever we seem to be lacking something we need, or are used to having, there is a word for us in it, which is more needful than just having our need met. It can change our lives. We need to take our eyes off what we want long enough to see what He would say to us.

Jesus embraced the concept contained in this verse to such an extent that He went on a forty-day fast — in the desert — alone, without food or drink. When the devil tempted Him, He used this verse to stand against him. The enemy tried to get Him to break this fast by getting Him to meet His own need:

*“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”* (Matthew 4:1-4)

An appetite for God’s word can be cultivated just like any other appetite:  
*“Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes long for the pure milk of the Word that by it you may grow in respect to salvation if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.”* (1 Peter 2:1-3)

Have you ever tasted the kindness of God? What does it taste like?

There were people in Paul’s day who professed to know God, but were so inclined toward “earthly things” that Paul said their belly had become their god:

*“Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the*

*enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame — who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” (Philippians 3:19-21)*

*“... their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.” (NIV)*

*“They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite...” (NLT)*

The term *god* here has to do with someone who is in charge of our life, the one whom we submit to, the one we give our time, our energy and our money, and the one whose prompting we obey. Imagine having our endless appetite as the one we live for and always obey.

Paul’s word to the Christians at Colossi was straight-forward; set your appetites on the things above:

*“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*

*Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.” (Colossians 3:1-7)*

Where we place our affections and appetites is important. Let’s begin by asking the Lord to create new longings within us, for His word, His voice, and His will in our lives. Let’s ask God for new appetites for His presence and perspective. It’s even possible to come to the place that you love fasting, longing for it, because of what it adds to your life. Let’s ask for longings that are lasting, satisfying, and life-enhancing. Let’s fast with this goal in mind. Amen!

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