

SILENCIO

A RESOURCE OF LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATIONS, INC. © APRIL 2013, FOURTH EDITION

FASTING

WRITTEN BY DIANA BENNETT, DIRECTOR OF EMMAUS

Fasting is an ancient practice. In Jewish tradition, fasting had two primary purposes. First, it expressed personal or national repentance for sin. And secondly, fasting prepared oneself inwardly for receiving the inner strength and grace to complete a mission of faithful service in God's name. Over the years this spiritual discipline has become more than the original biblical combination of "prayer and fasting." At the core, however, remains the same intention--a healthy discipline rooted in freedom that brings our soul into deeper communion with God. Fasting creates the venue for stepping away from our culture and false idols and into the presence of God. With a posture of open hands, we release self-directed desires, distractions and actions that dominate our lives. Fasting is also rooted in God's invitation to us. Thus, we do not approach it for personal attention or from the pressures of peers. It is safe to say today's fasting practices include not only abstaining from food (as shown in the biblical examples), but also from news, media, shopping, entertainment, information systems and other aspects of life.

With fasting, we humbly yearn for God's powerful presence. We mourn over our lack of time in seeking his face; we weep as we confess our sins. Often, we are flooded with grief over life's circumstances. And along with prayer, we fast from food as one crying out to God for healing, salvation and repentance. In the act of release and obedience, we fast to curtail actions and addictions that take our focus away from God's centrality in our daily lives. We fast in preparation for Christ's coming again and call out to him to come quickly. We fast over our spiritual weakness.

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart with fasting and weeping and mourning." Joel 2:12

Fasting provides opportunities for us to back away from excess (perhaps frivolous delights) to allow God to form healthier pathways in our unforced rhythms of grace. Most often, fasting is a voluntary denial of something for a specific time and purpose by individuals or communities. It becomes a practice of embracing God's presence and a desire to commune deeply with him. It must not be for self-punishment. Instead, it provides space and time through prayer to enable us to joyfully listen to God's voice. In this, we enter into his sufferings and are enlivened by his Spirit. Yes, we call out to his Spirit to descend upon our hearts and fill us with his love and presence.

When God invites us by our inner yearnings and desires to practice the discipline of fasting, it becomes an agreement or commitment between God and us. We are warned that prideful boasting about what we are fasting from is not received as an offering to our Lord. Thus, our fasting must not center on the way we appear to others or what they think of us. Our fasting is unto the Lord.

Seek the Lord. Ask him for suggestions. Listen to his voice. Fasting is not so much what you give up as it is about what replaces that time and attention. And in hungering for God, yearning to hear his voice and crying out in prayer, we begin to notice his marvelous invitations to us. May it be so for you.

"Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God's word to us is a life substance, that it is not food ('bread') alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4:32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will."

- *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard

"Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Fasting helps us realign our cravings, brings us freedom, and positions us to experience the fullness of Christ."

- *Celebration of Disciplines* by Richard Foster

SPIRIT OF GOD, DESCEND UPON MY HEART

A HYMN BY GEORGE CROLY - 1854

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth, thro' all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art;
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

Hast Thou not bid us love Thee, God and King?
All, all Thine own soul, hear and strength and mind.
I see Thy cross there teach my heart to cling;
O let me seek Thee, and O let me find.

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear.
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love;
One holy passion filling all my frame.
The baptism of the heav'n descended Dove;
My heart an altar and Thy love the flame.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

- In your silence and solitude, ask God if he is inviting you into a discipline of fasting.
- If you sense an invitation from God, inquire what this fasting would look like. Remember this is private between you and God and perhaps a soul friend.
- If you are yearning for a deeper experience of God, be intentional about following through with what you have heard God bring to your attention.
- If you practice prayer and fasting, consult and consider why, how and for what time period this practice can be implemented.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are some of the barriers for you in beginning a discipline of fasting?
 - If you have never fasted, what might the invitation from God be to you? Is there something in your life that is spinning out of control? Is there a yearning to go deeper in your relationship with God? If so, ask what this fast would "look like."
 - If the purpose of fasting is to make space for extended prayer, what might you fast from to create that time and space?
 - How does God tend to communicate with you? His Word? Inner nudgings? Community? In what way would a prayer partner or spiritual director assist you in future fasting?
-

O Lord, my God, my soul thirsts for you. I yearn to hear your voice and to experience deep communion with you. My desire is to know you and your path for my life. Please show me practices and habits that I can cease for a season in order to pray more often and be transformed by your powerful Holy Spirit. Amen.

SUGGESTED SPIRITUAL FORMATION RESOURCES

A Hunger for God by John Piper

Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites by Lynn M. Baab