

Hungering for God

A Biblical Examination of Fasting

Part A- Should 21st Century Believers Fast? Is Fasting Biblical?

Lesson 1- Longing for God

Isaiah 30:18-26

18 Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him.

19 O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.

20 Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, *He*, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher.

21 Your ears will hear a word behind you, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right or to the left.

22 And you will defile your graven images overlaid with silver, and your molten images plated with gold. You will scatter them as an impure thing, *and* say to them, "Be gone!"

23 Then He will give *you* rain for the seed which you will sow in the ground, and bread *from* the yield of the ground, and it will be rich and plenteous; on that day your livestock will graze in a roomy pasture.

24 Also the oxen and the donkeys which work the ground will eat salted fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork.

25 On every lofty mountain and on every high hill there will be streams running with water on the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.

26 The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be seven times *brighter*, like the light of seven days, on the day the Lord binds up the fracture of His people and heals the bruise He has inflicted.

The origins of fasting are found in a deep seated “**longing**” for God. The English word “longing” comes from the Hebrew word *chaka* which means: *to wait with desire*. So fasting denotes a desire to wait for God; a desire to see God; a desire to be near Him and to touch Him and to be touched by Him. So at its very core- fasting is the “hunger” of a homesickness for God. And this “hunger” is divided into two parts:

1. A Holy Grief
2. A Blessed Hope

1. A Holy Grief

Romans 7:14-25

There is an ongoing grief in the heart of genuine believers over indwelling sin. Our redeemed souls are encased in an unredeemed body. And our unredeemed body dwells in a fallen world that is dominated by satan and a world “system” that operates in hostile opposition to God and His Ways. Martin Luther taught that believers war against three foes:

1. The World
2. The Flesh
3. The Devil

The World

Now the “world” that Luther had in mind is *not* the *created* world that God made that He said was “Very Good” (**Genesis 1:31**), but rather the “world system” that operates in hostile opposition to God as delineated by the Apostle John in **1John 2:15-17**:

- ✓ The lust of the flesh
- ✓ The lust of the eyes
- ✓ The boastful pride of life

The Flesh

Jesus said that there were three things that appeal to our unredeemed flesh that have the ability to “choke the Word” so that it becomes unfruitful in our lives:

- ✓ The pleasures of this life (**Luke 8:14**)
- ✓ The deceitfulness of riches (**Mark 4:19**)
- ✓ The desires for other things (**Mark 4:19**)

The Devil

The devil that Luther was referring to is satan- the fallen arch-angel Lucifer. Satan was “**thrown down to the earth**” out of Heaven for his rebellion (**The Revelation 12:9**), “**like lightening**” (**Luke 10:18**), and now goes over all the earth and “**prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**” (**1Peter 5:8**). And James told us in **James 1:13-16** that the way that satan tempts a person is by him being “**carried away and enticed by his own lust**”.

All of these things bring about a holy grief within genuine believers that they are not more spiritual, that they fall into temptation too easily, that they don’t resist the devil more effectively, that they are far too worldly, and that they sin far too much.

So part of the longing for God that precipitates both our desire and need to fast is a holy grieving over our failures and weaknesses, and to escape (even if only temporarily) our sins, temptations, and hindrances.

2. A Blessed Hope

But on the opposite end of the scale lies a great hope- that we can gain spiritual strength, insight, and stamina by temporarily pushing away from the traps and temptations and idolatries that plague us when our bellies are full and get alone with God.

So fasting consists of these two parts:

- ❖ Part of fasting says that we have come to recognize that our longing for God has been compromised because our desire to savor all of this life has grown so strong (Grief)
- ❖ The other side says that our appetite for this world is temporarily lost precisely because our longing for God is so intense (Hope).

Occupy and Be Separate

God tells us to do two things that seem to be contradictory on the surface. He tells us first to:

Luke 19:13b

Do business *with this* **until I come back.**

"Do business" with the world. Occupy till I return. In other words, Jesus said, *"I'm leaving, but you stay here and make a life for yourself and carry out My Will in this fallen hostile world until I come back to get you"*. But then, He also said,

2Corinthians 6:17

Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord.
"AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.

And so as God's people, we are to "occupy" and "do business" with the world, and yet we are to "Come out from their midst and be separate". So we are to be "in" the world and yet not a part "of" the world. Jesus Himself prayed

John 17:14-17

14 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

15 "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*.

16 "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

17 "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.

So that is what we are to do. But *how* are we to do both things? How do we live in this world and yet not become affected by what goes on in the world? For example, how do you work hard to make money to support your family and pray that God will bless you and make a way for you, and then rejoice when God does that and continue to rejoice as God continues to bless- and yet still maintain a life that is free from loving money and entrapped by covetousness? At what point did you cross over the line from the good and spiritual aspect of working hard to provide for your family into lusting for more of this world's goods? Many times we don't even see the line- until *after* we have crossed it. Sometimes we don't sense that we have already lost our hunger for God because all that we are enamored with is a blessing from God.

So we see two sides of the same scale. As our appetite for the world is resisted- our hunger for God is satisfied, and as our hunger for God is resisted- the more of this world we seek to savor. So one "hunger" wars against the other, and yet we *cannot* feed both of them. God has created us in such a way that one "hunger" must suffer as the other one is filled.

So fasting is the satisfying of a hunger for God that already exists and that has become so intense that it drowns out any appetite we might have for the things of this world. But fasting is *also* the impetus whereby we fight to *have* a hunger for God that has *already* been drowned out by our appetite for the world. So fasting is not only the spontaneous result of already having a superior delight in God- it is also a weapon that is used to fight against every power in this world that would take that delight away.

The Greatest Hindrances Can Also be the Greatest Blessings

We must understand that the greatest enemy that stands in the way of us having a hunger for God is not poison- but the blessing of good food. It is not the seven course dinner that the world places before us that robs us of our longing for God- but the constant snacking all during the day. It isn't the overt, blatant, huge, and visible sins, but rather the endless bombardment of triviality that dulls us into surrendering our hunger for God.

Now there are many things that satan can do to rob people and destroy lives- and yet when Jesus described in **Luke 14:18-20** what kept people away from the Banquet Table of His Glory- He said it was things like:

- ✓ A piece of land
- ✓ A yoke of oxen
- ✓ A wife

... things hardly associated with sins much less things able to divert hunger away from God. Yet from this warning- we see that the greatest adversaries to God that

hinder us the most are *not* God's Enemies- but His Gifts! And the most deadly appetites are *not* for the "poison" of blatant evil- but for the simple (and seemingly un-sinful) *pleasures* of this life. Because when it is God's Gifts that replace our appetite for God- that kind of idolatry is much harder to recognize- much less fight.

Now out of the three attributes of the Flesh that we discussed earlier- two of them are *not* evil in themselves:

- ✓ The pleasures of this life
- ✓ The desire for other things

.. and, thus, are very hard to recognize and fight. These are not vices in themselves- they are gifts from God. So for us to take pleasure and delight in what God has done or given is not simply something that we should do- it is *commanded* by God and is *expected*. This is your basic meat and potatoes and coffee and gardening and reading and decorating and traveling and investing and TV watching and Internet surfing and shopping and exercising and collecting and talking and laughing and enjoying that we do every day- many times with gratefulness in our hearts. And yet the Bible says these are the very things that have the power to choke the Word of God until it has no effect upon us!

Mark 4:19

but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

So when I am saying that fasting springs forth from an overwhelming longing for God- I mean to say that by fasting we are saying that we will do *anything* and go *without* anything- if by any means we may protect ourselves from the deadening effects that these "innocent" delights have on us and preserve the sweetness of our longing for God. So it's food- but it's not *only* food- it is anything! Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the Pastor of Westminster Chapel in London during most of the 20th Century said,

"Fasting if we conceive of it truly, must not... be confined to the question of food and drink. Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting."¹

My point is that "Good" can do great damage. God's Good Gifts can bring about sin in us. The Apostle Paul said that the Law of God was "**holy, righteous, and good**" (**Romans 7:12**). But then he said that, because we are sinful and fallen creatures, that good, holy, and righteous Law, arouses "**sinful passions**" in us (**Romans 7:5**).

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Vol.2 (Grand rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p38.

Romans 7:7-11

7 What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "*YOU SHALL NOT COVET.*"

8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin *is* dead.

9 I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died;

10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;

11 for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

Paul was saying here that while the Law of God is good- we are *not* good. And because we are *not* good- that which *is* good may sometimes produce problems for us. There is absolutely nothing wrong with God's Gifts. What is wrong- is *us*. God has graciously given us the earth and animals and the union between a Man and a Woman- and yet Jesus said that fields and oxen and Marriage can keep a man out of Heaven. And that is why Jesus said,

Luke 14:33

So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

Anything has the power to stand in our way to hinder us from becoming a true disciple- *not* just pure evil; *not* just easily recognizable sins- but even the gifts that God gave to us. So it should not be surprising that the greatest competition that we face for our devotion and affection for God might very well be what we have thanked and praised Him for the most.

Loving God More

So just how does fasting help us to keep from turning "gifts" into "gods"? I think a good way to understand this is by reading the account of Abraham with his son Isaac.

Genesis 22:1-14

This describes a radical (and rare) kind of fast- the sacrifice- not of food- but of Abraham's "son of Promise". What does the Bible say in **Genesis 22:1a** was the reason why God put Abraham in this position? But based on **Genesis 17:15-19** how did Abraham get Isaac in the first place? So is it safe to say that Isaac was a "gift of God" to Abraham? Yes. And yet here God *requires* that Abraham sacrifice the very gift that God gave him!

Now we need to understand that God didn't do this because Isaac was *evil*- but because in Abraham's eyes- he was *good*! In fact- to Abraham- Isaac was *essential* for the fulfillment of God's Promise. So as far as Abraham was concerned- Isaac was *indispensable*- because without Isaac- God's Promise would fail. So to Abraham- Isaac was actually more important to the fulfillment of the Promise of God than God was. And so to bring Abraham into a proper understanding that God is more important than anything- God *required* that Abraham be willing to give up the very thing that seemed to him be the *best* thing that God had given him.

So fasting is not about giving up that which is *evil*- but that which *seems* to be the *best* and the *most necessary*. And fasting is trusting that even if you give that "best thing" up- God will provide something even better! So fasting helps us to love *God more* than we love what God has *done* or what God has *given*.

Now what did God say in **Genesis 22:12** after Abraham passed his test? And how can we reconcile that statement with the fact that God is Omniscient? For help, let's read what CS Lewis wrote about this:

"If God then is omniscient, he must have known what Abraham would do, without any experiment. Why then this needless torture?" But as St. Augustine points out, whatever God knew, Abraham at any rate did not know that his obedience would endure such a command until the event taught him: and the obedience which he did not know that he would choose, he cannot be said to have chosen. The reality of Abraham's obedience was the act itself; and what God knew in knowing that Abraham "would obey" was Abraham's actual obedience on that mountain top at that moment. To say that God "need not have tried the experiment" is to say that because God knows, the thing known by God need not to exist." (*The Problem of Pain*, 101)

God desires to know the actual, lived-out reality of our preference for Him over all things. And He wills that we have the testimony of our own authenticity through acts of actual preference of God over His gifts. A real lived-out human act of preference for God over His gifts is the actual lived- out glorification of God's Excellence for which He created the world. So fasting is not the *only* way or even the *best* way that we glorify God in preferring Him above all else. But it is *a way*; *one* way to do so. And it is a way that can serve all the other ways. 1700 years ago, Augustine said this:

"For the most part, the human mind cannot attain to self- knowledge otherwise than by making trial of its powers through temptation, by some kind of experimental and not merely verbal self-interrogation."²

In other words- we easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we love God above all things- unless our love is actually and frequently put to the test. And so we must show our true delights- not merely with words- but with sacrifice. That is what fasting is.

² Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XVI, Section 32 (New York: Random House Inc., 1950) p. 554

Now it is true that a willingness to sacrifice a son says more than the willingness to sacrifice a sandwich- but the Principle is the same. And so many small seemingly insignificant acts of preferring fellowship with God above food can form a habit of communion and contentment that makes one ready for that ultimate sacrifice- should God choose to demand it from us. This is one way that fasting serves all our acts of love to God. It keeps our "preferring faculty" on alert and sharp. It simply will not allow the issue to rest. And it forces us to ask repeatedly:

Do I really hunger for God? Do I miss Him? Do I long for Him? Or have I begun to be fully content with what He has given and what He has done?

Christian fasting therefore is a test to see which desires control us. What are our "bottom line" passions? In his chapter on fasting in his book, *"The Celebration of Discipline"* Richard Foster said,

"More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the Image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other things."³

Psychologically, that sort of thing is spoken of a lot today, especially in regard to people who have much pain in their lives. We would say these people are "medicating" their pain with food. They anesthetize themselves to the hurt inside by eating. But this is not some rare, technical syndrome. We *all* do this. Everybody. All the time. No exceptions. We *all* ease our discomfort using food and cover our unhappiness by setting our eyes on dinnertime. Which is why fasting exposes all of us- our pain; our pride; and our anger. Foster went on to say,

"If pride controls us- it will be revealed almost immediately. David said, "I humbled my soul with fasting" [Psalm 35:13]. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear- if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first, we will rationalize that our anger is due to hunger. And then we know that we are angry, because anger is already within us. But we can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the Power of Christ."

So one of the reasons for fasting is to truly know what is in us- just as Abraham found out what was in him. Many say today that God tested Abraham so He could see what Abraham would do. I completely disagree with that. God is Omniscient and already knew what Abraham would do. It was Abraham *himself* who didn't know what Abraham would do when put to the test. And it was *only* Abraham who *needed* to know. In fasting- all this will come out and we will be able to see it. And that will force us to either deal with our lack of love for God or try to smother it again.

³ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978) p. 48

So when mid-morning comes and you want food so badly that the thought of lunch becomes as sweet as a summer vacation- but you suddenly remember, "*Wait! I made a commitment! I can't have that pleasure. I'm fasting for lunch too.*" So what will you do with the indwelling sin that is inside? See, you formerly blocked it out with the hope of a tasty lunch. So the hope of food gave you the good feeling to try to balance out the bad feeling and you didn't have to confront the sin. But now, because you are fasting, that hope is gone because there will be no tasty lunch. And so fasting has *forced* you to find a way to confront sin in your life.

The Hungry Handmaid of Faith

It is in these times that we really begin to discover what our spiritual resources really are. The things I discover about my own soul during times of fasting are very valuable to me for the ongoing "fight of faith". That is when the "Hungry Handmaid of Faith" steps in. And what a humble servant she is! Very quietly- almost without a movement- she brings up out of the dark places of my soul the dissatisfactions in relationships; the frustrations of ministry; the fears of failure; and the emptiness of wasted time.

And just when my heart begins to retreat to the delicious hope of eating supper with family and friends at Pizza Hut- she quietly reminds me: "*Not tonight.*" And this can be a devastating experience at first. Will I find spiritual Communion with God to be sweet enough and hope in His Promises deep enough- not to simply cope- but to actually *flourish* and *rejoice* in Him? Or will I rationalize away my need to fast and simply continue to retreat to the medication of food? The Apostle Paul said,

1Corinthians 6:12b

... I will not be mastered by anything.

Fasting reveals the measure that food has mastered us. Or television or computers or books or games or gardening or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God.

Why Did God Create Bread and Hunger?

One of the reasons why food has this amazing power is that it is so basic to our very existence. But *why* is this true? Why did God create bread (or the wheat and the water that makes the bread) and design humans to need it for life? He *could* have just as easily created us in such a way that we didn't need food. But He didn't. And so God made us on purpose in such a way that we would have to have food to live.

But why bread? And why hunger and thirst? The answer goes back to our worship of Him. God created bread so that we would have some idea of the Value of the Son of God when He says,

John 6:35a

I am the bread of life...

... and God created the powerful experiences of both hunger and thirst so we would marvel when He said,

John 6:35b

... He who comes to Me will not hunger and he who believes in Me shall never thirst

And God did this to prove to us that we are *not* the center of the Universe- He is. And therefore the Apostle wrote:

Romans 11:33-36

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR?

35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?

36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen.

And even more specifically Paul said,

Colossians 1:16

For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him.

Therefore, ultimately, bread and hunger and thirst were created for the Glory of Jesus Christ. And therefore, God created fasting for the Glory of His Son as well. And this means that bread magnifies Jesus in two ways:

1. By being received and eaten with gratitude to God for His Goodness in providing it
2. By being forfeited out of a hunger for God Himself

So when we eat bread- we rejoice and taste the symbol of our Heavenly Food- the Bread of Life. And when we fast we say, "*I love the Reality of that symbol even more.*" So in the heart of the true saint- *both* eating and fasting are forms of worship. *Both* magnify the Worth of Jesus and both send the heart- grateful and yearning- to the Giver. And therefore each one- eating and fasting- have their appointed place. And each one holds a danger.

The danger of eating is that we might fall in love with the gift over the Giver. And the danger of fasting is that we might *belittle* the gift as we glory in our human engineered willpower to *not* eat.

May God help us all as we struggle to either eat or fast- to God's Glory.

Recap

1. Explain how fasting reveals both a Holy Grief and a Blessed Hope _____

2. What three things did Martin Luther teach that believers "war" against? _____

3. What three things did the Apostle John teach in **1John 2:15-17** constituted the "world" that we were not to love? _____

4. In **Luke 8:14** and **Mark 4:19**- Jesus said that three things have the power to choke the Word to the point that it will not be fruitful in our lives. What are they? _____

5. What does **The Revelation 12:9; Luke 10:18; 1Peter 5:8**; say about the devil? _____

6. After reading this- do you agree with Martin Luther? Why or why not. _____

7. What two things does God require that seem to be contradictory? _____

8. Why would God do that? _____

9. What has the potential to be our greatest hindrance in our walk with God? _____

10. Why would God do this? _____

11. What three things did Jesus say in **Luke 14:18-20** have the power to keep us from His Table? _____

12. In what way does **Romans 7** teach that God's Law arouses sinful passions in us?

13. Why did Jesus make the statement in **Luke 14:33**? _____

14. What was Abraham's *real* test in **Genesis 22:1-14**? _____

15. How may fasting help us in this? _____

16. What is meant by the phrase, "people medicate themselves with food"? _____

17. In what way is fasting, "The Hungry Handmaid of Faith"? _____

18. Why did God created hunger and thirst and the ingredients we use to make bread? _____

19. What are the two ways that bread magnifies Jesus Christ? _____

20. What are the inherent dangers in both eating and fasting? _____

Notes: