



Fasting

Why fast?

Some statements we make with our bodies. My daughter runs up to me and gives me a hug. She's saying that she loves me and she's pleased to see me but she does it with her whole body. Proposing marriage, we get down on one knee. When we want to declare something emphatically, we do it with our bodies.

When Adam and Eve rejected God, they rejected him with their bodies. More, they did it by eating — by eating the fruit. It wasn't with words. By what they did, they declared that their desires were more important than God. With their bodies, they declared that they were no longer God's people.

Fasting reverses that declaration. When Jesus came, thousands of years later, he too was tempted with food. He had already been fasting for forty days. Satan tempted him to eat. "If you are God's Son, turn these stones into bread." Jesus declared with his words that, as God's Son, bread was not the most important thing. He needed the words of his father more. And then he did not eat. With his body, he declared that he would not be ruled by his appetite but by the Word of his Father.

When we fast, we are using our bodies to declare who God is in our lives.

What fasting declares

Fasting declares that God is above our appetites

Although a lot of what is happening in Gen 3 is spiritual, Eve also ate the fruit because it looked tasty. She was putting her appetite over God. From that time onwards, food becomes a picture in the Bible for our desires. So, in Philippians 3:19, Paul talks about those who hate Jesus and says, "Their God is their stomach." In other words, their only god is what they want.

By contrast, fasting stands starkly against our culture of gratification. Does fasting seem like a slightly strange thing to you? That is because saying no to what we want is strange in our culture - even unhealthy.

But when we fast, we make the statement that God is more important to us than our desires. It is declaring that we are his people above anything else. When we fast in the context of our prayers, we declare, like Jesus in Gethsemane that, even more than the thing that we're praying for, our desire is to see God's will done. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we declare that, more even than food, we depend on, we need God. In all of these ways, fasting says, "God, you come first."

That is also why a number of fasts happen when God's people see their sin. To fast is to recognise that we, too, have put our desires above God and his kingdom. So one response to fasting should be a changed life (Isaiah 58). When we fast, we should be ready for God to highlight areas in our lives that need to change.

So, prayer and fasting together is saying, "God, I am ruled by my appetites and desires. Let these prayers put those aside in favour of your good and perfect will."

Fasting declares that we stand with those who suffer

Fasting is described as afflicting ourselves (Ezra 8:21 and Isaiah 58:3, 5 call fasting afflicting our souls). So fasting is deliberate, God-commanded suffering. Yes, it is a token amount of suffering but it has a big impact on our theology of suffering and our prayers for those who suffer.

1. It tells those who are suffering that their suffering is not outside of God's will (cf. the thorn in the flesh, 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 and 1 Peter 1:6-9). If, in fasting, God can command us to suffer, even in a token amount, then suffering cannot be outside of the will of God.
2. We stand in solidarity with those who suffer. Yes, our suffering is small compared with theirs but we say in our fasting and our prayers for their healing, 'We are neither unmoved nor offended by your suffering. We stand with you.'
3. We stand before heaven saying, "We are willing to suffer to see these people healed." Take another example. When 100 people gathered to pray for Tom Stephenson's healing, it was raining. Non-stop. Now lift your eyes and imagine the conversation in heaven.
"Lord Almighty, there are a hundred people standing outside in the rain."
"Tell me, why on earth are they doing that?"
"They are praying for a young man who has entrusted his life to you to be healed of a deadly disease."
Would not heaven itself be moved in the face of that prayer?

Fasting declares that we are longing for the coming world

Jesus describes fasting as mourning because the bridegroom is not here (Matthew 9:14-15). In fasting, we declare that this world and its pleasures are not our ultimate desire. Our ultimate desire is the coming kingdom, where we will again be face-to-face with the bridegroom, our beloved Lord Jesus. Fasting is looking ahead to the coming world and saying that that, rather than anything that this world has to offer, is our home and our desire.

Fasting declares that we depend on God above everything.

In 2 Chronicles 20, God's people are under attack and there is nothing that they can humanly do. So the king, Jehoshaphat calls a fast and he prays to God, "You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you... 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."

The fast, like the prayer, is a declaration that, if God does not act, anything that we might do is useless. This is the feeling when the church fasts in Acts, on the eve of mission. God's people might be willing to face death for him but if God does not act, they might as well stay at home.

How do we fast?

Fasting together has power

In today's culture, we can easily miss the importance of statements that we make as a church. God loves us as individuals. He cares for us as individuals. And we will ultimately stand before him on judgement day as individuals, gloriously clothed in Jesus' righteousness.

But he also views us as a body — as a church. When we fast as a church, we are standing together as one body, declaring that God stands above every other appetite and desire. When that declaration is backed up with an earnest heart desire, it rings across heaven.

So in 2 Chronicles 20, the whole people of God fast as one. And God hears. And God answers. Fasting together is powerful and effective prayer.

What do I get to eat and drink while I'm fasting?

There are no hard and fast rules. It can be for a meal or a day. It can be giving up something or everything.

Many people continue to drink water through the day. John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4) and that was described by Jesus as 'fasting' (Luke 7:33). So, while locusts may not be your thing, fasting does not have to be giving up all food if that does not work for you.

Especially if you feel that, for you, fasting from food would be unwise for e.g. for medical reasons or owing to a present or historic struggle with disordered eating, why not consider a different form of fast? That could be giving up your phone for a day or television for a few days.

Perhaps most of all, though, it shouldn't be showy or to impress people (Mat 6). So we shouldn't go round telling all of our Christian friends, "Oh, I'm feeling a little weak, as I've been fasting all day, don't you know?"

But, within what you are able to do, it should be a real sacrifice - you should feel the absence of food or whatever you are fasting from. And that should drive you to remember and to declare with your heart as well as your body that God is above everything.

So what are we expecting when we fast?

Very simply, fasting changes things.

- We are changed: every time we feel hunger, we remind ourselves, "I want God's will to reign supreme." People often feel that fasting has changed *them*. Fasting changes us.
- This world is changed: we expect God to answer marvellously. As with Jehoshaphat and Esther, when God's people as a body humble themselves, God answers. And when God answers, the world is never the same again.