



**CHRIST  
CITY  
CHURCH**

## Fasting to Grieve

Bobby Gross speaks of Lent as a season in which we are asked “to embrace a spiritual gravity, downward movement of soul, turning from our self-sufficiency and sinfulness...humbled and thus made ready to receive from God a fresh and joyous grace.”<sup>1</sup>

Fasting is not about achievement, especially in the Lenten season. Rather, fasting is a bodily response to “grievous sacred moments,”<sup>2</sup> to the gravity of our human plight, and to the heart of our Creator.

Through fasting, we are choosing to feel as God feels, to be present with God’s presence, and to work with God as he is working in and through the brokenness and rebellion of His creation, His children. We fast because we are in tune with God’s response to our reality, and fasting helps prepare us for the often unexpected ways in which He graciously responds to us. In this way, fasting can be a preparation for feasting! We fast so that we might feast on the “bread of life,” which has become our resurrected lives.

The practice of fasting encourages us to be moved at particular moments in life into the depth of our union with God. And the events of Easter—Jesus’ façade of a trail, his brutal murder, the silence of the tomb, and the splendor of its emptiness—are truly sacred moments!

The gravity of these moments instinctually moves us to forgo food and sometimes drink, though our culture has conditioned us to resist our bodies' natural response. Rather than being carried by our union with God, we are driven to fill our emptiness and longings with food and drink (usually the unhealthy kind) as well as lust and wealth and unmediated self-expression, and even behaviors that “fix” our grave situation.

Rather than being led to join God in his good work of resurrection, to mature and bear the fruit of life with him, our responses prove shallow and unfruitful at best, choked out by satisfying our personal and cultural appetites. Fasting is a practice, a responsive habit, that helps us align our appetites with our heavenly Father and experience the “bless-ed” satisfaction in our hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:7). What follows is a guide to help us make fasting a Lenten habit and bodily response.

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<sup>1</sup> Bobby Gross, *Living the Christian Year: time to inhabit the story of God*, 127.

<sup>2</sup> Scot McKnight, *Fasting*, xviii-xix, 166-167.

# THE SET-UP

## Pick A Day

We encourage you to choose a day where you can either begin or end your fast with your community—your Gospel Community, your spiritual companions, our faith family at the Gathering, or other Jesus followers with whom you share life. **Wednesdays during Lent** are a great day for that, as you can fast during the day and break your fast in worship [at VHOP](#) that evening.

## Pick The Duration

Once you choose a day, select the duration of your fast. Don't be afraid to start small and work your way into a longer fast. In our scriptures and faith history, the typical fast was somewhere between 12 and 24 hours. Unless otherwise led by the Spirit, start within that time frame.

- **Dinner to Dinner (approx. 24 hrs):** For example, have dinner on Monday evening, then abstain from food until after your typical dinner on Tuesday evening (skipping breakfast and lunch and using dinner to pray with your DNA group). Brake your fast with a light, late meal before bed.
- **Dinner to Lunch (approx. 18 hrs):** For example, skip dinner on Saturday evening and breakfast on Sunday morning. Break your fast with communion on Sunday and a healthy lunch with your Gospel Community before Gathering with others from our faith family for afternoon worship.
- **Breakfast to Dinner (approx. 12 hrs.):** For example, skip breakfast and lunch on Wednesday. Break your fast on Wednesday at VHOP.

## Embrace the pull of the “spiritual gravity”

During Lent, we are encouraged to reflect on the reality of our personal and societal estrangement from our Father's heart and intent. As Gross notes, “during these weeks we become especially mindful of the sinfulness that alienates us from God, indeed, the human evil that nailed Jesus to those rough beams.”<sup>3</sup>

The point of fasting, contends Scot McKnight, is that our body in fasting “identifies with God's perspective and grief in a sacred moment. Fasting enables us to identify with how God views a given event; fasting empowers us to empathize with God...taking on the emotions of God in a given event...When people...are fasting, we should ask ‘In response to what?’”

There is a litany of *grievous sacred moments* which might draw us to fast, to feel the weight of the world. Things happening within ourselves and within our world, or both. We fast to enter into the

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<sup>3</sup> Gross, 128.

gravity of these situations *with* God, letting ourselves feel what God is feeling, knowing God is with us, and working for good even in such moments.

Here is a “starters list.” You may think of something not on this list. Regardless, *make sure you know what is drawing you into your fast before beginning.*

- Personal sin
- Sins against you or others
- Death of a loved one
- Impending or present disaster (personally, communally, or globally)
- A lack of “reflexive” holiness and love and compassion in your life
- Fear and anxiousness for our future
- Threat to life or livelihood
- The impoverishment of others
- The absence of justice, peace, and love
- Severe illness of a close friend or family member
- The purifying presence of God
- The apparent absence of God

## THE FAST

### During the Fast | *Pray, Journal, Read*

**Praying** is the primary exercise during any fast. As you fast on the day you decide, each time you feel a hunger pain or think about food or take a lunch break (with no lunch!), use it as a prompt for prayer.

Turn your heart to God and focus on the sacred moment that drew you into the fast in the first place. *Let your heart feel the weight of what drew you into your fast through expressing your pangs to God.* The bodily discomforts join with the emotional aches. Let your spirit also feel the emotions and presence of God with you and God acting within this weighty situation—remember, there has and will always be an Easter morning! Your pains align with the pain of God in such a moment, and your desires for satisfaction, aligning with God’s desires and actions, which satisfy.

**Journaling** while you are fasting, is a great exercise. Write down what the Spirit brings to your mind as you engage with God in this sacred moment. Consider what this practice is revealing about God and about yourself.

Richard Foster says, “*Fasting reveals* the things that control us.”<sup>4</sup> He is especially correct when fasting is a bodily response to a sacred moment. Our emotions, feelings, and desires often dictate how we

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55.

respond to situations in life. When we choose to fast, we decide *not* to suppress our appetites but instead to let them find alignment and satisfaction with God’s emotions, feelings, desires, *and actions*.

This choice is an “affliction” (Lev. 23:27), denying for a time what we want and what we think we need so that we find what God desires and what God has already done and is doing is not easy. Spending time reflecting on what you feel at the surface (i.e., ‘hangry’) and about the sacred moment that drew you into the fast, can be revealing. Remember, the point of reflection is not guilt but freedom (Ps. 139:23-24), so treat yourself compassionately as God treats you, and honestly as he does as well.

**Reading scripture** during your fast is another excellent exercise. “Feast on the Word,” like Jesus did in his wilderness experience (Matt. 4:1-11).

In the Lenten season, our faith family will be immersed in the *Penitential Psalms* to help prepare us for Easter Sunday. These psalms—6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143—are good places to go to draw you into the heart of fasting.

## After the Fast | *Eat, Share, Pray*

Ideally, break your fast with your community, perhaps with communion and a light meal. Or, get together with your community shortly after fasting to discuss your experience and pray together. While fasting “is a matter between the individual and God,”<sup>5</sup> and we shouldn’t fast for others’ recognition (Matt. 6:16-18), sharing in our fasting will help make this unfamiliar practice something “natural” and a delight.

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<sup>5</sup> Author Wallis, *God’s Chosen Fast*, 44.