



Be With Jesus | Fasting

A Natural Response

February 21, 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP | Joel 2:12-14 (Lexi)

But there's also this, it's not too late –
GOD's personal Message! –
'Come back to me and really mean it!
Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins!'

Change your life, not just your clothes.
Come back to GOD, your God.
And here's why: God is kind and merciful.
He takes a deep breath, puts up with a lot,
This most patient God, extravagant in love,
always ready to cancel catastrophe.

Who knows? Maybe he'll do it now,
maybe he'll turn around and show pity.
Maybe, when all's said and done,
there'll be blessings full and robust for your GOD!

PRE-SERMON READING | Isaiah 58:1-11

Verses 1-5 (Eric)

Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people the transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.

They ask their God, 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, pursue your own business, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?

Verses 6-11 (Bethany)

'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?'

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?'

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

INTRODUCTION | The Nature of Fasting

Fasting may be one the most neglected, misunderstood, misused, and misguided practices in the history of our faith heritage. From those who used the practice as a badge of superiority, to those who turned the habit into spiritualized masochism, to those exercising the discipline as a magic bullet for various wants and issues, it is no wonder in modern church history fasting is relegated to the super Christians or the crazy ones. Fasting has been mingled, manipulated, and is ultimately missing from many of our experiences of church and faith.

There are multiple reasons for fasting's neglect beyond its historical abuses: our cultural obsession with food being one, our historical separation of body and soul being another. There is also our shallow and selfish understanding of happiness and our equating of self-denial with harm. We can mention, too, the domination of triumphalism in our worship and even the universal adoptions of fasting in other religions and dietary fads; all of which contribute to fastings neglect and misuse. Whatever the reason or reasons may be, most of us are unfamiliar, unpracticed, or unmotivated to fast. The good news of this fact is that we are all starting from a similar beginning with this faith practice!

So in introducing fasting as a habit of being with Jesus, I want to do so in a way that might help us avoid some of the misunderstandings and misuses of this ancient practice. Rather than trying to appeal to all the benefits of fasting (physically, psychologically, spiritually, etc.) or to exhaustively argue for the use of fasting in our faith's history by its most esteemed and canonized figures, I will assume what our scripture and Jesus assumed. **Fasting is a natural element of faith lived and that we will, therefore, be ones who fast.**

Now, I am aware that there are several people in our faith family who, for a variety of health reasons, are unable to fast. So let me say this, fasting is not commanded in our scriptures. There is only one required fast in the life of Israel, that is on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:26-32)—which we'll discuss more next week. Regular fasting is not required, though it is assumed. It is not a sin not to fast, yet our scriptures (as we'll see) presume that fasting is a normal, natural part of how people relate to God and others.

In his famed "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus addressed the motivations of his disciples for the practices that marked and measured their faith and faithfulness as God's people. In Matthew 6 verse 1, Jesus says,

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"Righteousness," if you remember, is a relational term denoting right or proportionate relating to God and others based upon the expectations of the relationship. In other words, we engage with God in ways congruent with his identity and to our status before him. Likewise, we engage with other humans in ways congruent (harmonious) to their identity and our status alongside them.

Because we have belabored this fact a dozen times in a dozen places, I won't do so now. But let me point this out, what we have seen even in the last month in Jesus' parables should give us a healthy and holy understanding of God's, ours, and others' identities, as well as who we are to one another (our status).

Now, back to Jesus' comment. When Jesus says "practicing your righteousness," he is describing those habits and exercises most common to relating rightly with God and others—patterns that should aid us in being "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

He then gives three such practices foundational to our faithful and fruitful living with God and one another:

*...when you **give** to the needy...* (v. 2,3)

*...when you **pray**...* (v. 5, 6)

*...when you **fast**...* (v. 16,17)

Jesus does not say "if you give," or "if you pray," or "if you fast." No, Jesus assumes that giving, praying, and fasting will make up the bulk of our "practicing righteousness," our relational habits.

A few chapters later in Matthew's gospel, some of those devotees we talked about a couple of Sundays ago approach Jesus wondering why Jesus wasn't training his disciples in a way that matched the intensity of their training in these habits. Asking Jesus,

*Why do we and the Pharisees [who they thought very little of by the way] **fast often**, but your disciples do not fast?*

(Matt. 9:14)

Jesus' response is a delight to every modern reader's ears,

*Can the wedding guests **mourn** as long as the bridegroom is with them?*

(Matt. 9:15a)

In other words, "We're feasting; the celebration is underway!" A slogan we have thoroughly embraced. But, Jesus then goes right back to his assumption from the Sermon on the Mount, saying,

*The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then **they will fast**.*

(Matt.9:15b)

Although the fast after the bridegroom's departure will differ from the fasting these religious devotees had known, "new wine...new wineskins" (Matt. 9:16-17) and all, Jesus once again assumes that fasting will be a habit of his followers that helps them relate rightly, proportionately, to God and one another. It won't be the only practice. There is giving and praying and feasting, but there is also fasting.

From our scripture's beginnings, as we heard in the readings from Joel (thank you, Lexi!) and Isaiah (thank you, Powells!), fasting was an expected and natural component of the life of faith. So 'natural' (i.e., ordered,

created) was fasting to God's relationship with humans and humans to one another that even the heathen Ninevites responded to reluctant Jonah's seven-word sermon by fasting,

*The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God. They proclaimed a citywide **fast** and dressed in burlap to show their repentance. Everyone did it—rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers.*

(Jonah 3:5)

So, what we've seen thus far is that our scriptures assume that fasting is a natural element of a lived faith. More specifically, fasting is a natural, bodily response to something out of whack with our relationship to God and others: a response of repentance to confessed sin against God in Joel and Jonah, a response to wronging one another in our daily activities in Isaiah, and a mournful reaction to an absence in Matthew.

Now, let's define this natural, bodily response we call fasting.

FASTING DEFINED

In our day and time, we use the term "fasting" to describe all kinds of activities and inactivities relating to diet and behaviors. Yet, for our purposes and what we observe in our scriptures, **fasting is the choice not to eat food (or sometimes, but rarely) drink water for a set period of time.**

While the term fast has been applied to the giving-up of "anything that hinders our communion with God,"¹ things like alcohol, social media, technology, and even sugar, this technically is not the fasting our scriptures depict. Many Jesus followers worldwide kicked off the Lenten season on Wednesday (see this week's [pastoral note](#)). Yet what they and many of us will be doing in giving up particular food items or behaviors is more appropriately call *abstinence*, which in itself is a good thing.

Yet what we see in the development of the Lenten season is that it started off as regular, total fast from food.

Stretching from three weeks to forty-days before Easter, the early church would fast from sunrise to sundown and each evening break their fast in family and community meals. The practice is like the still current Muslim tradition of Ramadan. The early church didn't always align on the length and details of the Lenten fast (i.e., what meats were permitted and what time the fast ended each evening, etc.). However, "what united the church from very early on was a commitment to use the...days of Lent as a time of introspection, confession, penitence, and fasting to prepare for the miracle of forgiveness on Good Friday and its life-giving power on Easter."²

I am sure many, including many in our faith family, who observe some part of the Lenten season, share in this introspective focus and preparation for grace and new-life which rises on Easter morning. But the point remains that abstaining from certain foods or beverages or habits and delicacies to help our focus, is not fasting as we are defining it. Contrary to popular belief, Daniel's denial of the rich and sacrificed food of

¹ Arthur Willis, *God's Chosen Fast: a spiritual and practical guide to fasting*, 21.

² Scot McKnight, *Fasting*, 92-93.

Babylon is never called a fast in our scriptures (Dan. 1:8-16). Again, his choice was a good one, even a wise one, that helped him and his fellow Israelites from being fully grafted into Babylon, but his abstaining is not fasting.

Fasting is simply the choice not to eat food (or sometimes, but rarely) drink water for a set period of time. So then the question becomes, why fast?

FAST AS A RESPONSE NOT A MEANS TO GET RESULTS

For most of us, based on my conversations over the last few weeks, if we have ever fasted, we have fasted because we wanted something from God. We wanted clarity on a decision, salvation for a family member, God to move mightily in some fashion, and even release from some addiction or anxiety or spiritual oppression. And I don't want to belittle such movements into fasting. In fact, I've joined each of you in a fast for similar reasons, hoping that through my fasting, some desired result would satisfy. And in some cases, the desired results came to fruition! And in some cases, it did not.

Our experience with fasting and results is consistent with what we see in the Bible. Sometimes fasting leads to the desired result like protection for Ezra and the Israelite exiles on their return from Babylon to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23), but sometimes it does not like in the death of David's child even after his seven-day fast in II Samuel (12:15-23).

But here is the issue, when we understand fasting as means to a desired—even good—result, we tend to be prone to legalism, susceptible to superstition, and often disappointed. Much of the misunderstandings, misappropriations, abuses, and ultimately neglecting of fasting has been born because we fast to get something, reducing fasting to a mathematical or magical function.

What we observe in our scriptures, read in the testimonies of faithful throughout history, and know in our own experience is that fasting does not always result in what we want from God. It is not like 1+1 in that it always results in 2. Nor is it like an incantation spoken with the right cadence, which results in the appearance of the thing named. So then, why fast?

Well, what we see in nearly every fast in the Bible, even for those who desired a specific result, is that what drew them into the fast, what compelled them to choose to give up food and sometimes drink for a period of time, was what Scot McKnight terms **“a grievous sacred moment.”**³ What we see in the testimony of scripture and throughout our faith's history is that **fasting is an organic, biological reaction to a “grievous sacred moment” by those hungering and thirsting for righteousness** (Matt. 5:6). Fasting is a natural response to those longing to relate rightly with God and others in a way consistent with the gravity or weight of a particular moment.

“grievous sacred moments” are times in our lives when we can *feel* the weight of the world (internally or externally or both), moments when the gravity of a situation is inescapable. **These are emotional moments, moments where desires and feelings unrequited or painfully exposed overpower our stomachs.**

³ Scot McKnight, *Fasting*, xviii-xix, 166-167.

Such instants include the death of a loved one, a recognition of our sinfulness, fear and anxiousness around the future, threats to our life and livelihood, the desperate need of others, severe sickness, a lack of “reflexive” holiness and love and compassion in our lives, the absence of justice and peace, and even the absence or purifying presence of God.

The emotional weight of such moments instinctually moves us to forgo food and sometimes drink, though our culture has conditioned us to resist our bodies' natural response. Think about this for a moment. When someone you love dearly has passed away, the last thing on your mind or that even felt appropriate to the gravity of the relationship was to eat. The same is true when you recognize the grievousness of your sin against God or sibling. Or when we see or experience the horrors of war, violence, and oppression. Or when we feel the anxiety of uncertainty or the possibility of loss. The feeling also arises at the inability to aid a friend or family member in their plight against illness, the enemy, or themselves. In each of these moments, we *feel* as if food is not appropriate (our body doesn't even crave it). **The empty craving, the ache of our body, is for righteousness, for the restoring of right relationship.** Though often we don't let ourselves feel this way for very long.

Instead, we let our emotions, feelings, desires (appetites that are natural and need satisfaction) drive us to fill our emptiness and longing with food and drink (usually the unhealthy kind) as well as lust and wealth and unmediated self-expression, and even behaviors that “fix” the situation. But when we choose to fast, we are choosing something different. **We are not suppressing our appetites but are moved by our emotions, feelings, and desires into the natural bodily response that unites us with God: a “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6).**

God has designed our bodies to work in conjunction with our emotions and spirit. We encourage this harmony by choosing not to satisfy our bodily hunger and thirst but rather to join our hearts' with God's heart and his actions in those grievous moments. And as we said week-in and week-out last month, when we are joined to our Father through Jesus, our lives bear fruit that lasts (Jn. 15:1-17). Like a “watered garden” in which our “healing shall spring up speedily” (Is. 58:8, 11), our life with God comes to bountiful fruition.

FAST AS A “GUT” RESPONSE

“Heart,” the place of our emotions, desires, and feelings, in Hebrew, is often translated as “gut” or “abdomen,” connecting our bodily appetites with the appetites that drive us. **Fasting is a gut response, a heart response, to something out of whack in our relationship with our heavenly Father and one another.**

Look with me again at Isaiah 58, which the Powells read for us:

v. 1 | Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people the transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.

God's about to point out where they are getting things wrong, where they are not relating rightly to God and one another. What is off, and where they are missing it. Ironically, the unrighteous relating starts with *why* they fast. Let's keep reading,

v. 2 | *Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.*

The people of Isaiah's day are like many of us in our fasting. Often our desire to draw near to God is in search of some particular result. They "delight to know my ways," God says, and they "ask of me righteous judgments," in other words; they both wanted a personal relationship with God and God to judge in their favor: make a ruling that aligned with their desire, overcome their enemy, provide something they want, etc. And yet, they discovered, as we often do, that their humility and fasting seemed like it didn't work,

v. 3a | *They ask their God, 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'*

Their motivation to fast was a specific result, and they were perplexed by the lack of results. Perhaps to their surprise, and ours, God answers their question—those who ask receive!—in this case, not exactly what they were after.

God says their fasting is not a response to a grievous sacred moment, something out-of-whack in them and the world. God knows their motives because their hearts are out of alignment with his in the way they treat one another. (Does that sound like a parable we read last month?!)

v. 3b -4 | *Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, pursue your own business, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.*

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

The way they live with one another shows what appetites drive them, what cravings they want satisfied. In their interactions with God and one another, they let their emotions, feelings, desires (their own pleasure, own business) their own wants determine how they lived. What they hungered and thirsted after was not righteousness, or at least they were satisfied with something less than right, proportionate living with God and others. Having revealed the heart issue and gut problem, God asks his own question,

v. 5 | *Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?*

In other words, "Do you think that I am looking for a fast where you can prove your humility? Do you think I want you to prove how committed you are, how pious you are, how devout you are, how serious you are in seeking what my presence brings? Do you think that is why I listen to you, because you ask earnestly, persistently, religiously? (Does that sound like another parable?!) 'Will you call this fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?' When are your appetites out of alignment with mine?"

Having set the searching question before us, God then graciously does not leave us hanging but provides for us a picture of what he is after in his chosen, designed-as-a-natural-bodily-response-fast:

v. 6-11 | *'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

*If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and **satisfy** the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.*

*And the LORD will guide you continually and **satisfy** your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.*

Fasting is a bodily response that joins what we *want*, desire, and long for; into alignment with what God hungers and thirsts. When we enter a fast because of the bonds of wickedness, the straps of the yoke of a fallen world, the oppression of illness and evil and fear and sin, the plight of the impoverished, the shame and sin of others, and the brokenness of our closest relationships, “then shall our light break forth like the dawn, and our healing shall spring up speedily, our righteousness (right living with God and others) will go before us; and the glory of the LORD (his very presence) will be our rear guard.” As Jesus said,

If you then, who perpetuate evil effects and influence in the world, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

(Lk. 11:13)

Fasting as a response to a grievous sacred moment gets the result that we long for: God-With-Us, God-For-Us. What we need most (what our biological and emotional being needs to survive) is God guiding us continually, satisfying our desires (hunger and thirst even in the desert), strengthening us, maturing us like a watered garden whose supply of life never fails; all because in responsive fasting our hearts (emotions, feelings, desires, appetites) align with his.

WHAT NOW?

While fasting is natural, it is not normal. This is why our faith family throughout history has made fasting a regular habit. Dallas Willard comments that,

“The...mature person [spiritually, emotionally, wholly] is someone who has chosen the Kingdom of God—God’s reign over them—as their guide to **what is good**. And not only that, but Kingdom is understood as what will enable them to achieve and live for **what is good**. They have developed the

knowledge and habits that keep them constantly turned toward and expectant of God and God's action in their life. This is their primary source of *direction and empowerment* for all that concerns them and their world."⁴

The practice of habitual, responsive fasting encourages us to be moved by the emotions of grievous sacred moments into the depth of our union with God. 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 these situations. We fast because we are in tune with God's response to these moments, and fasting helps us become people who are attuned to God in such moments.

Perhaps it would be helpful to think of fasting as a regulation process rather than a suppression process.

When we willingly forgo the satisfying or appeasing of our appetites for a period of time, our emotions, feelings, and desires actually take us to the eternally good, rather than drive us to only temporal gratification. Fasting is a natural response that helps us mature emotionally and spiritually. If we can begin to think of and practice fasting, not as a means to an end but **a natural reaction in the organic process of maturation**, we end up with what we are after and what God is after for us: a heart, mind, soul, and body immersed in his love and loving others. **But the reality is we don't naturally move into fasting, and because of that, we remain infantile in our relationships.**

Rather than being led to join God in his good work, to mature and bear the fruit of life with him in such moments, our responses prove shallow and unfruitful at best, choked out by satisfying our personal and culturally conditioned appetites. So we need a little help to make (re-make) fasting a **natural element of faith lived, and therefore ones who fast.**

So here is my challenge to you and for me. Instead of researching all you can learn about fasting, or automatically saying no to fasting because you don't think you can do it, or trying fast on your own, **let's fast together.** Let's take one day each week for the next three weeks and fast. And if you're up for it, maybe continue the shared practice through Easter Sunday.

On the [church app](#) and the [website](#), we have put together a guide to enter into fasting. It is simpler than you think, and while our overly saturated bodies might struggle with the fast, and it may feel an affliction (we'll talk more about that in coming weeks), the reality is that God has designed us to fast. He has chosen fasting (with prayer and giving) to mark our life of lived faith.

Most fasts in history and scripture are relatively short, no more than 12-24 hours. And if we need to "nibble" a bit to get through it the first few times, who cares! The point is not to get something, a badge of honor, a higher rank in relationship, or even something you are craving. The point is to respond to God's heart and God's work, and thus receive all that will satisfy,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Matt. 5:6)

Let's pray.

⁴ Quoted by Jim Wilder in, "Renovated: God, Dallas Willard & the church that transforms," 21.

COMMUNION READING | Psalm 63:1-8 (Holly)

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where
there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than
life,
my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.

My soul will be satisfied as with fat and
rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with
joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches
of the night;

for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I
will sing for joy.

My soul clings to you,
your right hand upholds me.

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION

Father, all human hearts lie revealed and open before you. Forbid that we should seek to hide from you anything that we have done or thought or imagined this week. All these things that are hidden from others, let us now openly acknowledge in your presence. Let no false shame keep us from confessing the wrongs that proper shame should have kept us from committing.

Father, whose tender mercies cover us all, humbly and sorrowfully we crave your forgiveness and restoration for the sins of this week:

- **For every weakening and degrading thought towards another and ourselves that we have allowed to dwell in our minds;**
- **For every hasty and thoughtless word spoken to you and neighbor and family and friend;**
- **For every failure of self-control;**
- **For every stumbling block we have put in someone else's way, binding on others what has been loosed from us;**
- **For every lost opportunity to love as we have been loved;**
- **For lazy feet and procrastinating wills.**

Grant that as the days go by, your Spirit may more and more rule in our hearts, bearing His fruit in our lives with you and with one another. Into your loving care we commit all those who are dear to us. Bless all those with whom we live and work and worship. Grant us a *satisfying* sense of your reality and power.

Through the body and blood of Jesus, Amen.