

## START

As your Connect Group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

***Name the things in your life that would be hard to do without.***

***Is food on that list? What is the longest period of time you've gone without food? Why did you do it? How did it make you feel?***

*"We fast because we have tasted and seen the goodness and are desperately hungry for more of Him."*

-David Mathis

As one of life's essentials, and often one of our greatest pleasures, food is important to us. However, the Bible tells us about times when doing without food had a significant impact in the lives of God's people – individually and corporately. We want to dig into the discipline of fasting to understand its significance for us as believers today.

## What Is Fasting?

***We hear people talk about a "fast" in many contexts. How would you define a "fast?"***

Merriam Webster defines the word "fast" as to abstain from food. In the Old Testament verses we'll look at today the word used for "fast" is "tsôwm" (pronounced "tsome"). The root word means to cover over the mouth or to shut the mouth. In the New Testament the word used for "fast" is nēsteúō (pronounced nace-tyoo'-o). Here the root word means to abstain from food (religiously).

To fast means to abstain from something that is significant to us. Most often we think of a fast as from food, but fasting can be abstaining from anything that we choose. The question is why would we abstain from something as important to our health, and tasty to our palates, as food above anything else we love to partake of?

## Why Fast?

We may undertake a fast for many reasons, many of them medical. But let's look at spiritual reasons to fast. Richard Foster comments in Celebration of Discipline:

*“It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive. To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion...Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained...Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by ‘every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Matt. 4:4)...Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!”<sup>1</sup>*

**“Fasting should have a specific spiritual purpose. Identify what that is and design a focus to replace the time you would have spent eating. Without a purpose and plan, it’s not Christian fasting; it’s just going hungry”**

**-John Piper**

### ***Why spiritual fasting?***

Our motivation for fasting is important. What were some of the reasons that men and women of the Bible fasted? The Bible mentions fasting over 70 times. Here are seven circumstances in which believers sought God through this discipline.

- To worship God – Luke 2:36-38
  - In Luke’s Gospel, he tells of the prophetess Anna. As she sought to serve through worship in the temple, she fasted.
- To repent – Jonah 3:4-10
  - In Jonah, we find that fasting was a way to demonstrate a repentant spirit by the people of Ninevah.
- To prepare for ministry – Matthew 4:1-3a, 11, 17
  - Matthew describes for us a time of fasting by Jesus as He prepared for the public ministry He was about to begin.
- To seek God’s wisdom – Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23
  - In Acts, we find the followers of Jesus fasting as a way to hear from God in making important decisions.
- To gain victory – Judges 20:24-28
  - In Judges, the Israelites fasted to seek God’s will and favor in defeating their enemies.
- To show grief – Nehemiah 1:1-4
  - Nehemiah fasted as he heard a report of the disrepair of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.
- To seek deliverance and protection – Ezra 8:21-23
  - During this same period Ezra and the Jewish people fasted and prayed for a safe journey back to Jerusalem.

**Let’s look a little more deeply at the first four of these as they relate to Moberly’s journey to seek God’s man as Senior Pastor.**

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978, 1988), 54

## 1) To worship God (Luke 2:36-38)

<sup>36</sup>There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. <sup>38</sup>At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

*“First, let if [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven...”*

*-John Wesley*

“Anna’s name means “grace.” She may have been 84 years old (the NIV translation says, “She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.”) Anna was a long-time widow in a day that was threateningly difficult for widows, who were often exploited and neglected in spite of biblical commandments for God’s people to care for them. She had moved from the tribe of Asher to serve in the temple, worshipping through fasting and praying.

Anna longed to see the appearing of the awaited Messiah. As a prophetess she had a special gift of declaring and interpreting God’s message. “God’s timing is always perfect. Anna came up just as Simeon was praising the Lord for the Child Jesus, so she joined in the song!”

Fasting and praying allowed Anna to set aside time to focus on God: His character, His wonderful acts, His marvelous plans and purposes for His people. Anna used the time that she would have spent eating to concentrate on God. Worship allowed her to enter deeper intimacy with God.

In Acts 13:1-3 (we’ll look at this later), the apostles were noted to be “worshipping the Lord and fasting.” Worship and fasting must be inextricably woven together. When we put aside other things and intensify our focus on God we can worship Him in ways that we never could when we gazing on the things of this world, whether out of necessity or pleasure. As the great hymn says: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face...and the things of earth will grow strangely dim...in the light of His glory and grace.”

The other elements of fasting such as seeking wisdom, protection, victory, and so-on must never replace the central focus of God as we seek Him simply to know Him and to follow Him. God is worthy of our concentrated worship and focus. There are other secondary purposes which we will look at in a moment.

***How might fasting and prayer enhance our individual and corporate worship?***

***Why is important for fasting to first be focused on worshipping God and only then for other benefits?***

## 2) To repent (Jonah 3:4-10)

*<sup>4</sup>Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, “In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!” <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least. <sup>6</sup>When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he issued a decree in Nineveh: By order of the king and his nobles: No person or animal, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all. They must not eat or drink water. <sup>8</sup>Furthermore, both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may turn and relent; He may turn from His burning anger so that we will not perish. <sup>10</sup>God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster He had threatened them with. And He did not do it.*

The word “repent” is a word that we often hear at church and in religious circles. We need to understand what the word means to us personally in order to understand what it has to do with fasting and prayer. In the book of Jonah, we learn that Jonah (yes, the Jonah who was in the belly of the well) finally went to the city of Nineveh to pronounce God’s judgment on the evil people there. A judgment that sure to come unless they turned from their wicked ways toward God. The word “turned” is the word “*shuwb*”. The people were called to turn from their way of life and beliefs to a new one. It was a point of choice, of changing their mind about their beliefs and behavior. When the people of Nineveh chose to do so, God relented of His judgement.

In the New Testament, the word “*metanoō*” is translated “repent.” It means to think differently, to reconsider morally or feel compunction. It literally means to change one’s mind. When we are called to repent we are called to change our minds about how we see ourselves (sinners separated from God who cannot save ourselves on our own), how we see God (a holy and righteous God who is simultaneously just and all-loving), and how we see Jesus Christ (our only hope of redemption through the shedding of His blood AND the rightful Lord of our lives). Changed belief leads to changed behavior.

Fasting is an outward sign of our inward repentance. “*People in every social strata, from the greatest to the least, hoped that God might turn from His anger and spare them.*”<sup>2</sup> God desires that we have nothing in our lives that we consider to be more important than He is. He calls us to identify anything or anyone that interferes with our relationship with Him. He calls us to identify any sin (missing the mark) that we have not confessed to Him and “changed our mind” about. A time of fasting and prayer can help us to focus inwardly and identify anything that calls for us to repent...any sin or rebellion towards God’s will in our lives. It gives us time to identify any sin in our lives as well as a focused time to confess of that sin, asking for forgiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Hannah, “Jonah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1469.

The beautiful part of repentance, true changing of our mind towards sin in our lives, is the restoration of our relationship with the God who loves us. Acts 4:19-20a says, <sup>19</sup>*Therefore repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out,* <sup>20</sup>*that seasons of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...* We all long for the “seasons of refreshing” that come when the Lord is fully present in our lives.

***How do we identify things in our lives that need repentance?***

***Why is it important to you to spend time in repentance while fasting? What might cause us to not want to go through this process?***

### 3) To prepare for ministry (Matthew 4:1-3a, 11, 17)

<sup>1</sup>*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.*

<sup>3</sup>*Then the tempter approached him... <sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and angels came and began to serve him...*

<sup>17</sup>*From then on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*“Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in Him a source of sustenance beyond food.”*

-Dallas Willard

Jesus had just experienced baptism at the hands of His cousin, John the Baptist - not because He needed it, but because He wanted to set an example for us and please His Father. He immediately went into the desert, tradition locates the place near Jericho, for an extended time of fasting, prayer and fellowship with His Father. He was preparing to move from the first 30 years of His life into His next three years of intense ministry.

At the end of this time of preparation He was readied for two things. The first was to successfully deal with the incredible temptations that “the tempter,” Satan, would throw at Him. Jesus was fully man, just as He was also fully God, and so temptation was still just as real for Him as it is for us. Jesus needed to have His mind and heart prepared through intense focus on God and His Word.

The second mission He was prepared for was the His public mission. Jesus now begins to preach publicly about the coming Kingdom of God that was near. These three years would impact the world and end in His brutal crucifixion. He needed to be prepared. Focusing on God and His Word helped Him to prepare for the people He would meet, the messages He would share and the challenges He would encounter.

Jesus needed this time of total focus on the Father to prepare for what God intended for Him to accomplish. How much more do we need to set aside times of focused attention on God to understand what His purposes are and to prepare to accomplish what He intends. Every one of us has a purpose for which we have been uniquely created. We can only do this in the power of God as we walk with Him. Fasting reminds us that we are sustained *“by every word that proceeds*

from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).<sup>3</sup> In John 15:5, Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.” To be prepared to carry out God’s mission for us individually and corporately we need to be focused on Him.

***How have you seen God prepare you to accomplish something for Him?***

**4) To seek God’s wisdom (Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23)**

*<sup>13:1</sup>Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup>As they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” <sup>3</sup>Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.*

*<sup>14:21</sup>After they had preached the gospel in that town and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup>strengthening the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith and by telling them, “It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>23</sup>When they had appointed elders for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

The book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, describes life in the early church. As men and women began to take the radical step of trusting in the risen Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives, they realized that they needed God’s wisdom to live life as He desires. Life in that day was complex as they often faced opposition from the culture outside the church and from heresies found within the church.

In these two passages, there were decisions to be made on who would serve the church and how they would serve in their role. In short, they needed to hear from the sovereign, all-knowing God. They fasted and prayed. They believed that God would direct their actions and lead them to accomplish His purposes through their obedience.

James tells believers, “Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5). Our culture is no less complex, and our decisions relative to life in God’s Kingdom are no less important. Fasting and praying allow us to focus on hearing from God regarding life’s decisions.

***Can you recall a time when you sought God’s wisdom for a life decision? How did He respond?***

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978, 1988), 55

## How Can I Fast?

The Bible describes several types of fasting:

- A Regular Fast – Traditionally, a regular fast means refraining from eating all food. Most people still drink water or juice during a regular fast.
- A Partial Fast – This type of fast generally refers to omitting a specific meal from your diet or refraining from certain types of foods.
  - Partial Fast- A partial fast is from 6:00 am to 3:00 pm or from sunup to sundown.
  - The Daniel Fast - Eat no meat, no sweets, and no grains. Drink water and juice. Eat only fruits and vegetables.
  - Meal Fast - Choosing to skip the same meal repeatedly for a set amount of time.
- A Full Fast – These fasts are complete - no food and no drink. Acts 9:9 describes when Paul went on a full fast for three days following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.
- Other Fasts – Although not mentioned in the Bible, Christians today commit to fasting from other activities as well.
  - Sleep Fast - Getting up extra early for the purpose of meeting with God.
  - Media Fast - Avoiding all types of media for a set amount of time. Also known as the Facebook Fast.
  - Other- 1 Corinthians 6:12 says that we should not be mastered by anything. Another fast could be giving up anything for a set amount of time that may be mastering you such as Facebook, television, cell phone, exercise, or shopping.<sup>4</sup>

### Precautions

Be mindful of any health issues that could make a fast unwise. For example, if you are a diabetic or have any other physical condition that requires a strict diet, be especially mindful not to put yourself in a compromised position as a result of a fast.

## Who Can Fast?

Every believer has the opportunity to spend time focusing on God through fasting. It is not reserved for the “super saints” of the Kingdom. It is important to take precautions should you choose to engage in a complete or partial fast that involves food and water. Someone with related health conditions might choose to fast from some other meaningful aspect of their life.

## When Should I Fast?

Fasting is for each believer to participate in when he or she feels led by the Lord to do so. There may be times of corporate fasting and prayer as well. Now is such a time in the life of Moberly Baptist Church as we seek a new Senior Pastor, as well as to prepare our hearts to be ready to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thebridgechurch.cc/resources/fasting-resources>

follow him in Kingdom work. As we journey together seeking God's man for His church we should especially be focused on seeking God's wisdom for our Search Committee, protection from Satan, repenting of our sins and victory in calling God's man.

On the evening of Sunday, January 24 our church family will gather to worship, hear from God's Word, and pray. This gathering will lead to a call for the people of Mobberly to participate in a two-week time of prayer and fasting (beginning Monday, January 5).

Each person may choose what their individual fast will be...but our focus as a church family will be:

- Worship – Praising and glorifying our God
- Repentance – Seeking out any sin that would hinder our relationship with God
- Preparation – Asking God to make us ready for the Kingdom purposes He has for us
- Wisdom – Pleading with God to give us wisdom in seeking His man as Senior Pastor

## So What Do I Do Now?

- ***Take a moment and share as a group.***
  - ***What is God beginning to lay on your heart regarding this time of fasting and prayer?***
- ***Begin to pray about how God would have you to participate in the upcoming 2-week fast.***
- ***Begin to think through how you will focus your prayers during this special time of fasting. Some ideas are listed below.***
- ***Close with a time of prayer asking God to speak to us in this special time.***

Pray for the Pastor Search Committee and Church Family

- Repentance and Cleansing
- Spiritual and Physical Cleansing
- Commitment and Endurance
- Humility
- Purity
- Rest and Refreshment
- Unity
- Wisdom
- Discernment
- Seeking God First
- Dependence on God
- God's Will
- God's Plan for Mobberly

Pray for Mobberly's New Pastor

- God's Calling on His Heart
- His Wife and Family
- Humility
- Discernment
- Conviction
- A Heart for the Mission of Mobberly

## **Additional Resources on Fasting**

### **Books:**

- “*Celebration of Discipline*” (Richard Foster)
- “*Fasting For Spiritual Breakthrough*” (Elmer Towns)

### **Web Sites:**

- Cru – Fasting Starter Kit
  - <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/fasting-starter-kit.html>
- Days of Fasting and Prayer Guidelines
  - [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/1927/prayer\\_fasting5.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/1927/prayer_fasting5.pdf)
- Desiring God – Fasting For Beginners
  - <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/fasting-for-beginners>
- Helpful Thoughts On Fasting
  - <https://www.thebridgechurch.cc/resources/fasting-resources>