

# “Lord, you are my portion”

Biblical patterns for fasting

*by John Hewitson*

How exactly does one set about fasting? Biblically, the commonest fast was not 40 days, it was just one day. We need to remember that fasting is a symbolic act and a spiritual more than a physical discipline.

Fasting simply means denying oneself (sacrifice) so that one can pray or minister for God. Food is such a basic need in our lives -it makes sense that it's the standard way to fast and pray. The feeling of hunger (physical) is turned into prayer (spiritual): 'Yes, Lord, as I feel the hunger I acknowledge that's how I am spiritually: I am hungry for you, to hear from you, to be empowered by the Spirit, to know your will... No, Lord, I will not give in to these bodily desires before I have spent this time with you... You come first.'

## Types of Fasting

To go without all food and liquid for more than a day can be dangerous to your health and, generally, when people fast they permit themselves at least water and often more. Quite popular is a juice-only fast (or tea, or milk), which permits one to continue relatively normal activity for a day or two. The principle is self-denial, not starvation!

When fasting, one's hunger is used as a prompt to pray, and time normally spent preparing food and eating is instead spent praying. However, I have also learnt a lot about my own approach to food through fasting, like what a slave I can be to food!

Am I sad? I eat. Am I bored? I eat. I eat for comfort, pleasure, celebration, socialising, anything. Eat, eat, eat... like a parody of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Be eating always, eat continually, and eat in all circumstances."

Fasting sets me free from that and suddenly I have a new freedom: a freedom not to live on the level of my appetites. Jesus said, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:27).

Often we are more interested in the experience of food than in satisfying our hunger. Taste buds can be promiscuous! Ever seen a dessert described as so delicious it's 'sinful'? Perhaps it is! Fasting helps me to appreciate the simple goodness of God's creation.

The 'juice-only' idea can be extended to include nourishing drinks, or to just denying 'choice foods' or desserts or meat etc. This latter approach, a common

practice for Lent, has become known as a 'Daniel' fast, based on Daniel 10:2 where he writes that he "ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over". Daniel used a simple vegetable diet as a fast as he prayed for the restoration of Israel.

The 'choice food' principle can also be applied to commodities other than food. For example, one can fast from alcohol or drinks, like coffee, from television, the telephone (cell phone?), music, internet... I recently saw a report of a women's group fasting from the wearing of jewellery or makeup!

What fasting has really taught me is that food is ultimately not about food, but about God. The meaning of hunger -in fact of all desire -is to point us to God, our only true Provider. Consumerism is -such a feature of our culture, but if we consume to live (life in 'all its fullness' - John 10: 10), that's good. Sadly, all too often we live to consume.

We shouldn't be too quick to make hunger go away. It can teach us so much about our frailty, need, and emptiness away from God. A full stomach can be cause for deep gratitude, but has more often for me been the cause of spiritual dullness and mediocrity. A little hunger never hurt anyone but its absence can. In terms of length, there are also many types of fasts. Some people fast one meal, some one day, some three days, some forty days! There is no 'formula fast' that is the only 'right' way to do things. Fasting is about the condition of the heart, not the number of days.

### **Steps to follow**

**MAKE A COMMITMENT.** Decide on the times you will commit to prayer. The best times to set aside are, of course, those when you would normally be eating. Further than the committed times, one's physical and spiritual hunger helps motivate 'praying continuously' through the day, whilst busy with other things. Sometimes it is appropriate to go off to 'a solitary place' to spend extended time in prayer (Mark 1: 35).

**WHY AM I FASTING?** Be clear what spiritual hunger is behind this, so as to focus your prayers. Remember not to dictate to God. Rather present problems or requests to him for his solution, his way.

**MAKE A CLEAR DECISION** on what exactly you will fast from, and for how long. It is easier to stick to a clear decision than to 'see how it goes'. Start simple - miss a meal, for example. As you gain experience with fasting you will understand better the goals you can set yourself.

**WHO WILL I TELL?** It's OK to tell people who need to know you are fasting. (Refer to Jesus teaching in Matthew 6).

## **Corporate Fasting**

In Matthew 6:16-18 when Jesus instructs us not to fast with public display. He is saying do let pride be a part of the motivation; do not use fasting to prove your piety. However, Jesus was not excluding corporate fasts. In Acts it is clear that corporate fasting was a normal part of church life in the early church. What Jesus meant was, if our motive is that we be known for our fasting, we sin.

Corporate fasting is also easier. There is support and accountability. It's easier to battle 'the flesh and the Devil' when we're not alone. Small groups can easily set aside a particular meal when they will fast and pray, getting together if possible. In some churches in Korea the weekly evening prayer and fasting meeting is better attended than the Sunday services, as people recognize the presence of God's Spirit there.

## **Some tips on fasting**

"BUT I WANT TO EAT". Remember Gethsemane, the choice Jesus made. Hunger will pass. More than half the world lives with this reality! How hungry am I for God? Fasting is about self-denial. You are saying God is more important than anything else.

"NOTHING IS HAPPENING". Don't expect a spiritual 'high'. Wait on God and wait! Sometimes we must realise that grapes are not useful for wine until they are crushed. God will pour out new wine in his time. Submit to his programme.

"A WARNING ABOUT WEIGHT" Fasting is not a weight loss programme! If you try to use this as a motivation to fast, you are on a 'sanctified diet' and will gain no spiritual weight! Anyway, if you lose weight through a fast it always comes back "fast". Do not fast because you want a blessing: fast because you want God.