



Dying to live: a personal reflection on the spiritual discipline of fasting

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Fasting would seem a very severe thing for anyone to do, let alone engage in regularly. Yet it continues to be a well-respected spiritual practice, in concert with prayer, among many Christian denominations. At its heart is a call to die for the Lord whom we have chosen to love, a dying to our carnal nature that Christ may live more fully in us. And when he does, we are transformed into agencies through whom mighty deeds may be wrought: national disasters averted, thrones secured and destinies preserved. And these are in addition to a slew of personal blessings.

DYING • LIVING • LOVE • DELIVERANCE • HOLINESS • DEVOTION • PRAYER •
DISCIPLINE • INTIMACY • REVELATION • COURAGE • WARFARE

The challenge of a Lenten fast

I well remember the moment. The minister moved his finger down and across my forehead as he made the sign of the cross, imposing the ash of remembrance. He called me by name and said: *'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.'*

At the end of the service to mark Ash Wednesday students of the Cambridge Theological Federation who had come together to celebrate poured out of the Emmanuel United Reformed Church building onto the busy Trumpington Street, everyone making their way, on bicycles or on foot, to their next engagement for the day.

It was morning, and yet my stomach churned and let out gurgling noises. I went everywhere that day with a blackened forehead, including pastoral visits to church members in far-away London, as I tried to fathom the depth of the commitment I had made. Challenged by a fellow ordinand, I had agreed to the traditional 40-day Lenten fast. I could drink water if I wished. Other than that I was to keep away from food and drinks until 6.00pm. Now as my stomach protested loudly, the idea itself seemed rather daunting, and I wondered whether I had been wise to make the commitment.

The challenge was not the fast. I have always gone without food, mostly compelled before I met the Lord Christ, but by choice ever since. Being without food is something you quickly learn to accept as normal when you have been in a civil war, and have had to go to school and university as an indigent student. It was therefore not at all strange to find that fasting was part of my faith when I began to follow Jesus in 1991. And far from being unique, my experience would be standard fare for many an African disciple of Jesus Christ. My peculiar difficulty on this occasion was that it was my first Lenten fast, and the thought of keeping it up for 40 days was not an easy one.

Should I even fast?

So, does my discipleship require me to fast? Some would say 'Yes, it does', while others would say 'No, it doesn't'. It is not, however, my purpose in this personal reflection to put the Church to rights on this debate. I take it for granted that as a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is a matter of *when*, not *if*, I fast. And as someone who came to a living faith in a Pentecostal tradition in Nigeria, fasting as a spiritual discipline was something I had become very involved in before I was

called away to discipleship in British Methodism. The fact that the Church had been founded by someone who took John Wesley for his mentor meant that I had been fed a diet deeply marinated in the Wesleyan tradition long before I became a Methodist.

Fasting and some of its forms

It is already obvious from the foregoing that fasting has a lot to do with food, lots of food and appetites! Specifically, fasting is a deliberate abstinence from food, water and, sometimes, sex for a limited time for spiritual reasons. Such abstinence may be limited to just food so that you may drink water or even juices if you wish. It may also be a restriction of the kind of food one eats. Daniel, who lived through three mostly hostile and ungodly empires, for instance, employed this kind of fast when he sought understanding regarding a vision from God. 'At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth' (Daniel 10:2–3a).

Three forms

Fasting can take the form of a *regular* discipline as part of one's devotional life. The Pharisees in the time of Christ fasted regularly, often twice a week, like the one in the parable Christ told about the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). Many people in the evangelical and Pentecostal traditions observe a regular fast as part of their spiritual discipline. John Wesley expected Methodists to fast twice a week.

It can also be undertaken as a *seasonal* discipline in the Church calendar, the most widely known of this kind being the 40-day Lenten fast. Many Christians add many seasonal fasts to the regular type. Typically, they would usher in the New Year with a fast that lasts for 30 days, beginning from somewhere around the fifth day of January. That may be followed up with another fast just before or after Easter, coinciding with Lent, anticipating an outpouring of power during Pentecost. There would be similar fasts the rest of the year, usually lasting from 3 to 30 days. I have known of a 100-day fast called to usher in the New Year. Many of these fasts would typically be tagged with beautiful, inspiring themes to motivate people to undertake the exercise, and with great expectations. Many of these themes are typically built around material prosperity and physical healing, the staple of Word of Faith churches and Seeker-Friendly fellowships.

A fast can also simply be an occasional practice in times of *emergency*. This is the kind of fast that Queen Esther called when she learned that a decree had been issued by Haman to exterminate Jews. For three days and nights they ate no food and drank no water. The effect was that when she appeared before the King without being invited, which was contrary to custom and the penalty for which was death, the King was moved to suspend protocol. She subsequently obtained deliverance for herself and her fellow Jewish people.

A fast may be as short as a day and as long as 40 days. Most people set the time aside to concentrate on the core spiritual exercises of reading and studying the Bible, meditation, prayer and singing. It is to cease *doing* for a while, and emphasise *being*. It is to gather all the faculties of body, spirit and soul together and focus their collective attention on God. It is a coming away from the regular rhythm of life to free up more time, space, energy and attention to seek God. It's a kind of girding up of the loins.

Fasting is a subtle recognition that the believer is both a pilgrim and an exile, and that the spiritual life is one that is lived in a hostile world (from *aiōn*, Greek for *age*). This flows from the biblical understanding that earthly life is cut off from God in rebellion and sin and therefore hostile to the rule of God. God's paradoxically loving response to that ugliness is the redemption offered in Christ. Fasting therefore becomes a means of grace, the empowerment we need to be in the world, but not of the world; to live in exile without losing the love of home; to travel as pilgrims and arrive successfully at our destination, without being distracted by, and diverted into, the byways of corruption and apostasy.

Three calls

So in general terms fasting could also be understood more theologically as a call to choose, a call to love what or whom you have chosen, and a call to die for your choice.

First, in biblical teaching, disciples of Christ are called to *choose* Christ, which they do by following him, exclusive of all others. In making that choice, they also take on the incarnational nature of Christ's ministry, to deny self to the point of death if need be. In the Incarnation Christ carried out the greatest, severest and costliest ever possible fast. His choice to be a human, to live a human life and, though sinless, to suffer and die the most scandalous death known to humanity models an incomparable fast. In Marxian terms, this would be class suicide. Fasting mirrors this self-denial.

Second, disciples are also called to *love* their Lord exclusive of all other lords. Having made their choice, they must love as their Master loves. 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done', Jesus tells God as he wrestles in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42). Loving the Lord we have chosen will sometimes call us to the Gethsemane of self-denial in fasting. In other words, our love for God would lead us up the path of a fast now and again, simply because the irresistible passion of such love *compels* (controls) us to do so; for Christ has died 'so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Corinthians 5:15). Tucked away at the bottom of a long catalogue of Paul's agonies, in the same second letter to the Corinthians, is this shining diadem, '*... often without food*' (11:27), evincing a sense of Paul having to fast as well as other things he did because of his exclusive love for his Lord and Master.

Third, loving our choice also means a willingness to *die* to other things in order that we may live exclusively for our choice. This is the sense in which Paul talks about the crucifixion of the disciple of Christ in Galatians 2:19–20. The disciple henceforth has no life but the life of Christ lived through him or her by the Holy Spirit. This dying or forsaking all others, to employ a metaphor from the marital vows, is really to rid ourselves of all useless baggage that would otherwise be a hindrance. We walk faster without them, and our pilgrimage is that much more hospitable.

When we fast

So when do we fast?

We fast when we are *hungry*. A hunger for God, and more of God, is the baseline for every fast. Scripture consistently calls God's people to a pursuit of God with a warm-hearted ardour. The life of a disciple of Christ is to be marked by such ardour as he or she learns to love God with all their mind, soul, spirit and strength. The disciple displays this ardour as he or she learns, where necessary, to 'hate' mother, father, brother, sister and even wife or husband in order to follow Christ.

In one of his many sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley notes that fasting helps this ardour by de-sensualising the soul. He argues that 'fullness of bread' fosters 'carelessness and levity of spirit', and notes, 'Here is another perpetual reason for fasting; to remove the food of lust and sensuality!'

Holy people of old often fasted when seeking *guidance* from the Lord; in other words, when hungry to know God's mind. The church in Antioch was on a fast when the Holy Spirit gave them instructions to send Barnabas and Paul away as missionaries (Acts 13:2–3)

National emergencies have also been the occasions for fasting. In ancient Israel, the King of Judah was confronted by three powerful neighbours. What would he do? 'Then Jehoshaphat was afraid; he set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the towns of Judah they came to seek the LORD' (2 Chronicles 20:3–4).

While they were praying, 'the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel ... He said ... "Thus says the LORD to you: 'Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God's'"' (20:14–15). The people didn't have to lift a bow. Their enemies had fought and completely routed one another!

John Wesley tells the story of a national fast in 1756 under George II. Afraid of a French invasion, King George, the last British monarch to lead troops into battle, called for prayer and fasting. In his journal, Wesley says:

The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely, God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquillity. Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.

That would not be the last time a British monarch would seek such help from God. King George VI called a National Day of Prayer for 26 May 1940, asking people everywhere (including the Commonwealth) to plead for divine intervention when the Second World War seemed all but lost. The King, cabinet ministers and government officials went to Westminster Abbey to pray. People across the British Empire thronged their local churches. What historians now call 'the miracle of Dunkirk' is largely credited to this national supplication. Such was the depth of appreciation that a Day of National Thanksgiving was called for 9 June to the thankful words of Psalm 124, 'If it had not been the LORD who was on our side ...'.

A chest of treasures

Are there other real benefits to fasting, and for whom? To start with, Christ promises a reward when we fast: 'your Father ... will reward you' (Matthew 6:18b). The rewards are as varied as the reasons we fast, covering the entire spectrum of human needs. Apart from dramatic stories of national deliverance and corporate guidance, those who fast gain many a spiritual blessing.

Intimacy

In the 40-day fasts by Moses and Christ we see the forging of a special spiritual intimacy with God, as they aligned themselves with God's sovereign purposes preceding the commencement of an epochal work. Twice, for 40 days on each occasion, Moses went up the mountain to be alone with God. Moses would wield a special authority unique in the Jewish nation, a position he continues to have within Judaism. Before he began his ministry, Christ went into the wilderness for 40 days. Not surprisingly, many church leaders have been called to follow this example, observing some period of fasting before commencing their ministries.

Revelation

Fasting is an aid to spiritual alertness, clarity and revelation. By drawing us away from a 'fullness of bread' and de-sensualising our souls, fasting enhances sensitivity to clues and nuances of insight given by the Holy Spirit. Specific direction may be given through just a word or phrase of Scripture, and understanding secured as a previously dull text is suddenly illumined by the 'quickenings' power of the Holy Spirit.

This makes fasting a great help to holiness (being set wholly apart for God). By denying the appetites you deny the flesh (carnal nature), thus improving your separation from the world unto God. A life of ease and comfort feeds the senses but dulls the spirit, a fact that Moses repeatedly highlights as he reminds the second generation of Israelites about to enter the Promised Land to not forget God when they have settled into a good life in Canaan (Deuteronomy 6:10–15; 8:11–20). This is why a regular discipline of fasting is particularly helpful, like fuel for a long journey which needs topping up now and again.

Courage

Sometimes we are appointed to extraordinary deeds for which we must find extraordinary doses of courage. Some might lean towards the easy Dutch kind and reach for a pint too many. But an Esther would lock herself away. 'If I perish, I perish,' she famously remarked. Injustice is better fought on an empty stomach, with parched lips and throats. Then God sends his armies to the battle. Watch Esther as she leads a charge against Haman's plans for ethnic cleansing.

Similarly when the prophet Ezra led the second of three waves of returning exiles from Babylon in 458 BC, he secured their safe passage through a fast.

For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that 'the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him.' So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty. (Ezra 8:22–23)

It is the kind of courage that focuses on the true treasure of discipleship: our ultimate home. The here and now are not as important as the hereafter. Even in adversity, we can plod on. The great faster, Paul, says, 'though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day,' and that our present 'affliction' is a 'momentary' thing which yields 'an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure' (2 Corinthians 4:16–17). It teaches us to see delayed gratification in a new light, just like the patriarch Jacob waiting seven years for Rachel, and 'they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her' (Genesis 29:20).

Spiritual warfare

In a sense fasting is only necessary because we live in a world often dominated by evil. In fasting, we draw near to God and find intimacy, revelation and courage, all of which help us to 'fight the good fight' as we are enabled to live victorious Christian lives. Fasting therefore helps us to better appreciate the reality of spiritual warfare, one in which every disciple is called to take part. The temptation of Christ in the wilderness is a striking picture of this warfare. So, too, is Daniel's 21-day fast during which the angel Gabriel, sent to give Daniel the answers he seeks, is halted in a protracted mid-air battle with the satanic prince of Persia.

Stamina

Fasting enables us to cultivate perseverance in prayer. Its use ultimately is to give us the stamina we require to spend time with God. Fasting would otherwise not be a spiritual exercise. This provision of stamina offers a well-worn motivation to fast. To gain strength to go on, we fast, denying ourselves the legitimate things that hinder us. In this sense, fasting recalls the biblical 'girding up the loins'. Without fasting we would feel faint in the place of prayer, and become very likely to stumble in our journey.

Worship

True worship is greatly helped when we have fasted because the humbling of our souls and the genuine repentance we express before God clears the way for us to properly sense the *worthiness* of God and to convey the same to him through worship and the obedient lives we go on to live as a result. Heathen Nineveh was given one last chance to make its ways right with God, as Jonah stormed the great city. 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' Jonah gloated. A national fast, in which both 'man and beast' were 'covered with sackcloth' was proclaimed. They were delivered by the Almighty God to whom they had 'mightily' prayed.

Health

Not the least benefit of fasting is the well-attested physical health that it brings to its many practitioners. There is the well-toned complexion that follows weight loss. There is also the mental alertness that produces resolution, as well as the strength and determination to maintain it. All of that brings an unyielding bounce to our mental gait, supported by a vigour that is sworn to the long haul. Daniel and his three Hebrew colleagues would not eat the 'King's meat' yet were physically lovelier! It is not surprising that many smart fitness practitioners have included fasting (usually without the praying) in their beauty regimen.

Conclusion

My first Lenten fast proved to be very useful to the point of prescience. I came under a barrage of difficulties not long after, for which I needed extra spiritual strength, the kind that only fasting could supply. Disciples of Christ are warned that they will face many a tribulation in this world, tribulations whose only goal is to push them away from the Lordship of Christ.

In my personal walk with Christ, I have found fasting an indispensable aid to victory over the many tribulations that come my way; a constant reminder that all of our 'here and now' (however long and harsh the trouble may be) is but for a moment; and an incredibly small inconvenience compared to the glory that shall be revealed on that Last Day towards which all of human history is rushing.

Ash Wednesday has come to hold a special place in my pilgrimage since that challenging Cambridge encounter in 2011. Each Ash Wednesday, when I feel afresh the press of the ashen cross on my forehead, I am reminded not only of my mortality but, more importantly, I am also reassured again of that most precious of all gifts: the hope of eternal paradise, a hope that is based on the certainty of the Resurrection of Christ, for whom I *die* each time I fast that I may *live* more abundantly in him here and hereafter.