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with **GOD**
FASTING

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WHAT IS FASTING AND WHY DO IT?

Chances are, when you hear the word “fasting,” you think about one of the following:

1. A health fads that are designed to cleanse your body, control your diet, and help you lose weight
2. An old-fashioned religious discipline that makes you holier through misery

But don't worry. Fasting as a spiritual practice isn't about either of those things. It's not about physical health, and it doesn't have to be a painful experience. (It's challenging at times, but not painful.) It's certainly not a religious ritual to show your devotion to God—Jesus' death and resurrection put a permanent end to empty gestures like that.

Fasting isn't about earning God's favor. It's about reminding yourself that you already have his favor, and he can sustain you in a way that nothing in the world can. Fasting helps you find freedom from addictive behaviors, over-indulgence, or materialism. It's a practical way to say no to your appetites so you're able to focus on your dependence on God.

Fasting is not about the permanent removal of harmful things in your life. It's not a replacement for rehabilitation or twelve-step programs if you're dealing with serious addiction. It *is* the temporary removal of things that are often positive (and even necessary for life) in order to ensure we aren't using those good things selfishly or indulgently.

Here are some common things people fast from:

- **Food** – We need food to live, but we can also use it like a drug to soothe our pain.
- **Social media** – These platforms are a great way to stay connected to people who matter to us and are far away, but they can also distract us from being present with the people who are closest to us.
- **Shopping** – We need consumer goods to survive. There are also things we want because they make life fun or more pleasant, and there's nothing wrong with that. But we can also look to material things for identity and meaning in life.
- **Technology** – Phones, video games, and even the Internet are great life enhancers, but they also have the power to numb us to what's most important in life—our relationships with God and other people.
- **Media** – Television, websites, radio, and periodicals keep us informed, but they can also give us a distorted view of the world around us.

Taking a break from any of these things—or anything else that you depend on—is a great way to center or recenter your life on your dependence on your heavenly Father. But choosing to fast from anything can have surprising side effects. It sometimes reveals that you are controlled by things you weren't even aware of, which sets the stage for future fasts.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

If you're in a group, use these questions to have a conversation about how you can support and encourage one another as you explore fasting. If you're not in a group, reflect on these questions to help you consider what it would look like for you to connect with God through fasting.

1. What do you think or feel when you hear the word "fasting"? Is your response positive or negative? Why do you think that is the case?
2. Have you fasted from anything in the past? If so, what did you learn from the experience? How can you take what you learned into your next fasting experience?
3. Read Matthew 4:1–11.
 - Is it surprising to you that Jesus practiced fasting? Why or why not?
 - Jesus' time in the wilderness was important preparation for the mission God gave him. What does the passage suggest about the connection between fasting and resisting temptation?
 - Jesus is tempted to indulge his physical needs, manipulate God to his own end, and take a shortcut to power and influence. Are you tempted (in different ways) to do any of those things?
4. What are your greatest concerns about fasting? How can you pray about those concerns? Who can you talk to about them?
5. From what do you need freedom? What kind of fast might benefit you most?

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START FASTING

As you begin the spiritual practice of fasting, the first thing you'll have to decide is from what you'll fast. When the Bible talks about fasting, it's always fasting from food. That's a great place to start. Our appetite for food is universal, so food fasts are beneficial for anyone. They're the ideal way to redefine our relationship to our core appetites and learn firsthand "that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3b).

Whatever you choose, here are some things to keep in mind as you start your first fast:

1. Start small, but aim for consistency.

If you're fasting from food for the first time, it's probably not best to begin with a three-day fast or anything longer. Instead, do short fasts on a regular basis for a more extended period of time. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster recommends beginning with a lunch-to-lunch fast, one day each week. That means you'll eat lunch on your fasting day, skip dinner and breakfast the next day, and eat again at lunch the following day. Some people have done that for as long as two years, discovering a richer spiritual experience as they get deeper into the fast.

2. Focus on God.

Fasting isn't magic. It doesn't automatically make you more spiritual. In order to make the most of your fast, you'll need to use the feeling of absence left by whatever you've temporarily removed from your life as a prompt to focus your attention on your relationship with and dependence on God. Be present with your heavenly Father.

3. Pair fasting with other spiritual practices.

Fasting has benefits on its own, but it can also increase your focus in other practices. Fasting is great for super-charging your prayer life and Bible reading, in particular. While fasting breaks the hold of your physical appetites, prayer reduces your desire for control (and increases your trust in God), and reading the Bible reveals God's wisdom. That's a powerful combination.

4. Keep it between you and God.

Jesus gave his disciples this advice: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full." You don't have to be legalistic about keeping your fasting a secret, but not letting others know will help you focus on connecting with God.

5. Be patient.

At the beginning of any fast, your focus will probably be drawn toward how you feel and toward keeping the "rules" of the fast. That's why consistency matters. Over time, you'll be able to shift your focus toward God. That's even true if you do short fasts one day each week.

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FASTING TIPS

1. Eat light meals before you start and when you end a fast. It's tempting to try to fill up before a fast begins, but that's a bad idea.
2. Pay attention to your body. Hunger pangs, mild headaches (usually from caffeine withdrawal), and a sour taste in your mouth are normal in the middle stages of longer fasts.
3. If you're planning to fast three to seven days (or even longer), you can consider a juice fast. Abstain from all food and drink mainly water, but sustain yourself on a glass of fruit or vegetable juice a couple of times per day.
4. Don't overdo physical activity during longer fasts. You don't have to be inactive, but anything greater than moderate activity may cause some dizziness.
5. If you choose to do a longer fast, it's wise to get clearance from a doctor first.
6. **Don't fast if you're pregnant, diabetic, have heart disease, or any other medical condition that adds risk to fasting from food. Remember, you're not under any obligation to fast from food.** It's not a requirement for close connection to God. Instead, find a safe alternative for removing material distractions from your life so you can better focus on your heavenly Father.
7. Physical health is not the main purpose of a spiritual fast. But if you discover physical benefits during the course of your fast (e.g., reduced cravings for sugar, salt, or fat), feel free to take advantage of that discovery.
8. When you finish a fast, try to maintain your focus on God and control your sense of dependence on whatever it is you fasted from.