

12 GOOD REASONS TO GO HUNGRY

You don't hear much about fasting these days. But maybe it's worth a try.

by Victor M. Parachin

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On Feb. 6, 1756, a frightened and somber King George II of England called for a day of solemn prayer and fasting. Behind his call was the immediate threat of an invasion and war by the French. Later that evening, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, recorded in his journal the powerful and positive effect a day of fasting and prayer had had upon the nation:

"The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen. . . . 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 tranquility."

In a footnote he added: "Humility was turned into national rejoicing, for the threatened invasion by the French was averted."

Even though the Old and New Testaments mention fasting nearly 100 times, this highly worthwhile discipline is essentially absent from most of our lives. Why is that—especially when one considers the many giants of the faith who have chosen to fast, often for prolonged periods of time, over the centuries? We're talking about the likes of Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Jesus, Origen and Martin Luther. Shouldn't the example of these people mean something to us in regard to fasting?

Although most Christians may not feel the need to do a lengthy fast, there are benefits to be gained from even a short period of self-denial. Here are 12 reasons why fasting can be a good discipline to engage in from time to time.

1 *Fasting expands your compassion.* It's easy to talk about the problem of world hunger, but our emotional awareness of the physical impact of hunger is heightened when we do without food. "My sensitivity to the plight of the poor increased," says one woman who fasted. "Eating only one meal a day made me tired and resentful, and mine was a *voluntary* fast. What must it be like for those who are *lucky* to get one meal a day? I couldn't be indifferent to their suffering once I'd shared it."

2 *Fasting helps prepare you for a major challenge.* People in the Bible who faced great trials routinely prepared for them through prayer and fasting. For example, before Esther approached King Xerxes to ask that he spare the Jews of Susa from destruction, she encouraged her people to spend three days in prayer and fasting (Esther 4:16).

Esther felt that such a difficult enterprise needed prayers fortified by fasting if her effort was to be successful. "When this is done," she said, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." Consequently, Esther approached the king with confidence and boldness, persuading him to reverse an edict calling for the

annihilation of the Jews. A modern application of this would be to spend time in prayer and fasting whenever a personal or professional crisis looms.

3 *Fasting can improve your physical health.* Increasing evidence suggests that people are healthier and live longer when calories are reduced. Some researchers say that lower calorie-intakes can actually lower the risk of getting diabetes, heart disease and certain forms of cancer. They point to the residents of Okinawa, where calorie consumption is 30 percent below Japanese norms. Okinawans have an unusually high percentage of centenarians.

4 *Fasting benefits others.* There is a practical opportunity connected with fasting. The money saved by not eating can be shared with others. Consider the experience of Ron, a midwest attorney. "Most workdays I eat lunch out at a restaurant, usually with clients or colleagues. But last year, during Lent, I decided to skip lunch once a week. I stayed in my office reading devotional materials and offering prayers. Each week I set aside the money I would have spent on lunch. When Lent was over, I mailed a check off to a homeless shelter in the community."

5 *Fasting creates more time for other spiritual disciplines.* Beware of saying, "I don't have time to read the Bible or pray"; say, rather, "I haven't disciplined myself to do these things." Busy people in various professions are often forced to skip meals in order to meet emergencies and assist others. Likewise, we, as Christians, can certainly find ways to use the time we gain by not having to prepare and eat a meal.

6 *Fasting is "good for the soul."* "Irrational feeding darkens the soul and makes it unfit for spiritual experiences," observed Thomas Aquinas. In other words, don't be a glutton. Fast instead. Many who do say it contributes to spiritual renewal, increased insight, deeper commitment and clarity of life purpose.

7 *Fasting reminds us that we do not live by "bread alone."* Jesus, echoing Deut. 8:3, said, "Man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." People have a hunger that cannot be filled merely by food and other material things. Ultimately, meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment in life result from a healthy relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

8 *Fasting can give you more physical and mental energy.* Ironically, going without a meal often results in greater energy and vitality. German physician Dr. Hellmut Lutzner, author of *Successful Fasting*, observes: "Strength, speed, perseverance and concentration are by no means a function of your food intake. On the contrary, you think better and more quickly when your stomach is not full. What mountain climber would eat just before his climb? A runner will never reach her peak performance if she eats just before the start of a race." The same

principles apply to one's spiritual life. An overloaded stomach can interfere with prayer by making us feel sluggish and tired.

9 *Fasting helps us appreciate things more.* One man who fasted over a weekend broke his fast with a simple meal of green, seedless grapes. "After not eating for two days, I found the grapes unbelievably delicious," he said. "I felt like I was eating from an entire banquet. Prior to my fasting, I would merely have eaten the grapes without any awareness of their flavor, texture or taste."

New Testament scholar William Barclay notes that fasting is effective in restoring basic pleasures and helping us appreciate the ordinary. "Nowadays the appetite is blunted; the palate is dulled, the edge is gone off it. What was once a sharp pleasure has become simply a drug we cannot do without. Fasting keeps the thrill in pleasure by keeping pleasure always fresh and new."

10 *Fasting strengthens our virtues and weakens our vices.* "All great virtues bear the imprint of self-denial," observed American clergyman William Ellery Channing. Time in prayer combined with denial of food can help to expand the boundaries of our heart and soul. People who pray and fast regularly often experience greater compassion, kindness, sensitivity and love for others. They become less judgmental and more understanding. True humility grows while false pride is diminished.

11 Fasting is good for self-discipline. Many people operate on the premise that a primary goal in life is always to be happy and free from pain or discomfort. Our culture makes it easy for us to indulge ourselves. Who can argue that we are less resilient than our pioneer ancestors?

Fasting, however, can serve as an effective antidote to the increasing "softness" of life. A life that reaches out for every comfort and pleasure becomes weak, sluggish, flaccid, effete. Such a life is devoid of fulfillment and meaning. "No pain, no balm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown," noted William Penn.

12 Fasting is a way of following the example of Christ and the Apostles. Prior to His public ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in prayer and fasting (Matt. 4:1ff). The Scriptures also tell us that Paul and Barnabas regularly fasted before making important decisions regarding their church-planting ministry (see Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

If fasting seemed like a good idea to Jesus and His apostles, can it be such a bad thing for you and me?

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