

FOCUS 40
40 Days of Prayer and Fasting

Three Sermons on Fasting

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The Heart of Fasting

On _____, we as a church are going to begin a season of prayer and fasting that will last forty days. The number *forty* is a significant number in the Bible. It rained for forty days and forty nights. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years. Jesus fasted for forty days. And on _____, we as a church are going to enter into an intense time of prayer and fasting; a time in which we can really listen to God. In preparation for that season of prayer and fasting, we are going to spend the next two Sundays teaching on the spiritual discipline of fasting.

As I have been making announcements about the upcoming season of prayer and fasting, some of you have said to me, “I don’t have the slightest clue about fasting and what you are talking about. I’ve heard about fasting, but that is as far as my knowledge goes.” Others of you think of fasting as something that fanatics do. We have all heard or read stories about people going on a hunger strike for political reasons or to get their way. Some think that fasting is only done by religious zealots off in some cave in a faraway land. And others of you that think fasting is what you do from eleven o’clock at night until you wake up at seven in the morning. There is a lot of confusion and misconceptions about this topic, and there are a lot of people who think, “Big deal. What’s so great about fasting? Not eating can’t be healthy, nor does it sound enjoyable. Who in their right mind would willingly choose not to eat?”

Here is what we are going to do for the next three Sundays. Today, I am going to give you a definition of fasting and the biblical basis for it: What does the Bible teach about fasting? Next week we are going to look at all the different types of fasts in the Bible. Next week is the nuts and bolts. It’s the week most of you will be the most interested in and the week that will answer most of your questions. And then on the third Sunday, I’m going to teach on how to make fasting personal for you: How do you fast in a way that maximizes the benefits for you?

So let’s get started. Let me give you a definition of fasting that I think will be really helpful. Fasting is the *spiritual discipline of refraining from food for a period of time to focus on God*. Look at the different parts of that definition.

First of all, fasting is a spiritual discipline. Fasting isn’t something the modern church invented. Fasting isn’t something the medical community stumbled across and started recommending because of all the health benefits connected to it, which we will talk about in a minute.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline. It is something that God expects us to do. In fact, as you look through the Bible, you will discover that it was assumed that followers of Christ would fast. In Mark 2:20 (NIV), Jesus says, “But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them...” Jesus was referring to himself. He was saying, “There is going to come a time when I am no longer on this earth and when that time comes...” Watch what he says next, “And on that day they will fast.” In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus says these words in verse 16, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting” (NIV). Then jump down to verse 17. Jesus says, “When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face” (NIV). Notice the phrase isn’t, “If you fast.”

What you see all throughout Scripture is that the assumption is made that all of us that are Christ followers shouldn't ask, "Should I fast?" but say, "When I fast..." Fasting is a spiritual discipline; it is something that Jesus expects us to do. It was a normal part of Christianity from the very beginning.

Look at the next part of the definition. It's the spiritual discipline of *refraining from food*. I want you to notice that when Jesus is referring to fasting he connects it to food. We aren't talking about fasting from TV or from music or from a specific hobby. Yes, there are times we need to deny ourselves specific things, but when Jesus talked about fasting, he was referring specifically to food.

Why is it that when we fast we should specifically connect it to food? I think the reason is because our appetite easily becomes top priority in our lives. The power our stomach has over our life and our decision-making process is huge. Have you ever noticed what the most common question and topic is in your house? I would venture to guess it's on of these questions: "What's for breakfast? What's for lunch? What's for dinner?" When you watch TV, have you ever noticed what the most common type of commercial is? Food commercials. Burger King, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Sonic Burger. Every other commercial is an advertisement for food. When you are sitting at home and you are bored, what do you think about: I wonder what type of snacks are in the house?

Our stomach plays a major role in our lives. For most of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, our stomach is top priority in our life. Go ahead. Pat your stomach and say, "He's right, you are top priority." Some of you are sitting here and all you can think about is the Spalding donut you are about to consume or the feeling you have now that you consumed one or where you are going to eat after church.

God is very aware that our stomach is top priority in our life. God says to us, "There are times I want you to fast as a reminder that I'm top priority in your life." Any time God's position in our life is replaced by something else, our life begins to spiral in the wrong direction. Adam and Eve allowed their stomach to take top priority, and they literally ate themselves out of the presence of God. When we fast, we refrain from food, which reminds us that only God should be top priority in our life.

Fasting is the spiritual discipline of refraining from food *for a period of time*. One of the things we are going to learn next week is that there are different types of fasts and different lengths of fasts. Jesus fasted for forty days. Moses, on two separate occasions, fasted for forty days. Joshua fasted for forty days. Paul fasted for three days and then God healed his eyes. Peter fasted for three days. Daniel fasted for twenty-one days. The Bible teaches about half-day fasts and twenty-four-hour fasts. The entire nation of Israel fasted for three days. A fast is for a period of time.

And then notice the last part of the definition. Fasting is the spiritual discipline of refraining from food for a period of time to (say it with me) *focus on God*. The ultimate goal of fasting is to deepen our intimacy with God. It is a time that we put God back at the center of our life, and it's a time that we put God back in his rightful position as top priority in our life. It's the time we say, "God I'm so serious about you being the center of my life that I'm going to deny my most basic need so I have more time to focus on you."

When you begin fasting, you enter into a season of heightened sensitivity to God. You begin to learn what it means to depend on God in the moment by moment, which allows you to experience many of the blessings that are often missed because we aren't fully depending on him.

Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 (NIV), "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Fasting is not about manipulating God to get what you want. Fasting enables you to focus more intently on God. What you will discover as you get into your fast is that the reasons you began your fast become secondary as God begins to reveal to you the things he wants to speak to you about.

Let me share with you very specifically a couple of spiritual benefits connected to fasting. When you fast, one of the things that will happen is that you will gain **clarity**. In the Old Testament, there is a story about a man named King Jehoshaphat. King Jehoshaphat was the king of Judah, and according to the Old Testament, there was a day when three nations decided to surround Judah, declaring war on King Jehoshaphat. Unsure of what to do or how to respond and confused by what was happening, King Jehoshaphat went to God. In 2 Chronicles 20:3 we read, "Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah." It was during that fast that God gave Judah an answer. It was during that fast that King Jehoshaphat got clarity on what to do next, and because he followed God's direction, he experienced God's blessings.

Maybe you are in search of clarity. Maybe you are trying to decide what to do next vocationally. Maybe for a while now you've been sensing God's call on your life to go into ministry but you aren't one hundred percent certain. Maybe you are trying to decide what to do in the relationship you are in. If you are looking for God to speak into your life, if you are saying to God, "God, just give me clarity," it will happen when you fast.

Here is another benefit. When you fast, you will gain **courage**. Queen Esther was a woman in the Old Testament who needed courage. Esther had a cousin by the name of Mordecai, and Mordecai had gained some inside information. He found out that there was a bounty on his head and a decision had been made to execute all the Jews. So Mordecai spoke to Queen Esther and said, "You need to go to your husband, the king, and tell him that he can't kill all the Jews." Queen Esther knew that by going and questioning the king's decision, the king could take her life. So the fear started to settle in. The fear started to paralyze her, so what does she do?

Look at this verse in Esther 4:16 (NIV): "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law." So for three days they fasted. Why? Because Queen Esther needed courage. She was in desperate need of courage to be able to go and put her life at risk and talk to the king.

Maybe you need courage. You are living in life in fear. Fear about tomorrow. Fear about the conversation you have to have in couple weeks. Fear about the security of your job. And right now you need courage. You need courage to have that tough conversation. You need courage to change jobs. You need courage to do what God is asking you to do.

Esther needed courage, and her desire for courage drove her to fast. God came to her rescue and guess what happened? She got courage, she talked to the King, and the entire Jewish race was saved. Imagine how your life could be different if you had courage. Fasting will produce courage.

There is one more major spiritual benefit connected to fasting that I want to mention. When you fast, *breakthroughs happen*. There was an Old Testament prophet by the name of Joel. God asked Joel to confront the kingdom of Judah. So he summoned all the people together and said, “Look, here’s the deal. There are major sin issues going on and you need to change your ways. You need to turn from your ways. You need to clean up your lives.” And look how he told them to do it. In Joel 1:14, the prophet says, “Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD” (NIV). He basically says, “If the nation of Judah wants to finally see a breakthrough, you need to declare a ‘holy fast.’”

I don’t doubt there are people here that need to declare a holy fast. You’ve got issues going on in your life that you’ve been struggling with for years. You’ve got addictions that you can’t control. You’ve quit so many times that you’ve quit quitting. Maybe it’s alcohol. Maybe it’s smoking. It might be chronic worry. You might be addicted to Internet pornography. Maybe you are having an affair and you can’t seem to walk away from it. Maybe it’s spending money like crazy. And as you sit here you are exhausted. You can’t get away from it, but you desperately want to. You need a breakthrough. Joel called the nation of Judah to fast, and the result was freedom. For some of you, if you will fast, God will give you the freedom you’ve longed for.

There are all sorts of spiritual benefits connected to fasting—clarity, courage, breakthrough. God is just waiting to bless you in amazing ways, but he wants you to give him your full attention through fasting.

Not only are there spiritual benefits associated with fasting, there are also major physical benefits. Medical doctors have weighed in on the benefits of fasting. There was a well-known doctor by the name of Hippocrates. Hippocrates is known as the father of Western medicine. I’m sure you’ve heard of the Hippocratic Oath in which doctors swear to always ethically practice medicine. That is credited to Hippocrates. Hippocrates acknowledged the power of fasting. He believed the practice allowed the body to heal itself.

When you fast, your body detoxifies itself. Tests have proven that the average American consumes and assimilates four pounds of chemical preservatives, colorings, stabilizers, flavorings, and other additives each year. Those things aren’t meant to be in our body. It’s not healthy to have all that stuff floating around inside you. When you fast, your body eliminates those toxins.

On a fast, your best friend is water. Not Coke. Not Diet Coke. Not coffee. Not Mountain Dew. Not energy drinks. As you fast, you should consume large quantities of water. As you drink all that water, it flushes out the toxins. It rids your cells of all those toxins. During the first few days, you can expect to get have headaches, especially if you are a big caffeine drinker. That is your body releasing the toxins. You will have bad breath for a few days because your body is releasing the toxins.

Fasting is spring cleaning for your body. When you fast, your digestive system gets a break. Some of you are fifty-plus years old, and your digestive system has never had a break. It’s all clogged up and it needs some time to rest to clean itself out. As you rest your digestive track, you know what happens? You give it a break from combating the toxins that enter the body. And when your body isn’t busy combating toxins, all that energy is diverted to other areas of your body, specifically to healing to itself and strengthening your immune system.

When you fast, you will also lose weight. In the first few days, you can expect to lose about two pounds a day. After the initial weight loss, your body adjusts and you will lose a half pound to one pound a day. I just want to caution you. Don't fast with the ultimate goal of losing weight. This is not a weight-loss program. We fast to focus on God; however, for most Americans, the weight loss connected to fasting is a physical benefit.

Fasting has both physical and spiritual benefits connected to it. This is one of the spiritual disciplines that has been lost over the years. My hope is that when you think about fasting, this is what you will always remember: *Fasting helps you focus on God, resulting in extraordinary spiritual and physical benefits.* Fasting is more than just going without food. Fasting is more than an endurance test: "Can I make it twenty-four hours without food? And if I do, you will find me at Steak and Shake ordering the whole menu." Fasting focuses your whole self on God, resulting in extraordinary spiritual and physical benefits.

When we really start to understand what fasting is all about, and we understand why Jesus expects us to do it, and we see all the benefits connected to it, why wouldn't we want to do it? If someone you really trust came up to you and said, "I've got some information on how to increase your overall health and how to deepen your relationship with God," chances are you would want to know. And what we've learned and what we've seen all throughout Scripture is that fasting has extraordinary benefits, both physically and spiritually.

I want to be really upfront with you: fasting is not easy. The benefits come at a cost. Some of you will experience pretty bad headaches as you go through withdrawal from caffeine. For the first few days, the hunger pains can be almost overwhelming. You are going to want to quit; you are going to come up with every excuse in the world to quit; but if you stay faithful and fast for as long as God wants you to fast, you will experience a new intimacy with your heavenly Father.

To help you be successful on this fast, we as a church are going to support you in many different ways. Let me share with you some of the things we have planned to help you during this fast. First of all, water is your friend on a fast. You are going to need to drink lots of water. So we have purchased nice aluminum water bottles that look like this, and they have the Focus 40 logo on the side. Starting next week, these will be available, and if you want to get one, not only will they help you stay hydrated, but every time you look at it you will be reminded that you aren't alone and that all sorts of people are praying for you during this fast.

We will also have a twenty-one-day fasting journal available next week. This journal walks you through the fasting process day by day. Each day you will be given scripture to think about. You will be given insight about what your body is going through. And you will be given a prayer focus for that day. This is an invaluable resource.

Some of you are thinking, "What a minute, that is a twenty-one-day fasting journal. I thought this was a forty-day prayer and fasting campaign." It is a season of prayer and fasting for forty days. Do I expect you to fast for forty days? Only if God calls you to do that and your doctor clears you. This is a season of prayer and fasting. God may call you to fast for twenty-four hours. He maybe call you to fast for three twenty-four-hour fasts during the forty days. God may lead you to fast for twenty-one days or for a three-day fast. It is a season of forty days. We want everyone to increase the intensity of your prayer life for the whole forty days, but how long you chose to fast is between you, God, and your doctor.

We have also set up a forum online for you to share your experience and to read about what God is doing in other people's lives. All you have to do is go to Eastland.org and click on the link. This is what it will look like. [slide] Every day one of the staff will post a thought or a reflection as a way to encourage you, and you can read the comments from other people and add your own comments.

The other things we are going to change is the fellowship room, where you go and get donuts and cookies and coffee. We are going to change that room to a certain degree. It's still going to be a place for people to go and socialize, but we are going to create two walls in that room. On one wall, you will be able to write out prayer requests on a sticky note and post them on the wall; on another, you will be able to write and post praises on a sticky note. And for the forty days of prayer and fasting, there won't be any donuts in that room. There will be water and juice. Although not everyone will be fasting for forty days, when you walk into that room and you walk into your Sunday morning classrooms and there aren't any donuts but just juice and water, you will be reminded that we are in season of prayer and fasting.

Here is the last thing I will mention to you about church support. There are two dates you will want to write down. [slide] March 3 and 17 have been reserved for two very special Wednesday night services. Those dates are right in the middle of our campaign, which means as a congregation there will be an even more heightened sensitivity towards God. So on those Wednesday nights, we are shutting down our regular Wednesday night programming and having an anointing and healing service. The Bible teaches that when someone is sick, the church body should come together, anoint them with oil, and pray for healing. And that is what we are going to do, and I think God is going to show up in a very powerful way as we gather as a congregation to worship and pray together and to pray for each other. I think we are going to see some amazing miracles during those special Wednesday night services.

Here is my challenge for you this week. In preparation for the forty-day prayer and fasting campaign, I want to challenge you to start praying this week about how God wants you to participate. Begin asking God, "How long do you want me to fast for and what should I be praying about during this forty-day campaign?" And my other challenge is to consult your doctor to make sure it's okay for you to fast. Next week we are going to talk about the different types of fasts found in the Bible. Not all fasts require you to completely abstain from all food. We will get into that next week. But take this week and begin praying and asking God how he wants you to participate in this amazing campaign.

Let me just remind you one more time: fasting helps you focus on God, and extraordinary spiritual and physical benefits are results. As you enter this time of fasting, God is going to deepen the intimacy between you and him. I just want you to imagine what it's going to be like on the day that clarity occurs for you. Imagine the excitement as you finally know without a doubt how you are to respond to that next big decision. I want you to imagine what it's going to be like to finally have the courage to do what you know you need to do. Imagine the relief of knowing that God has strengthened you in such a powerful way that you can now have that conversation or you can take that next step. I want you to imagine what it's going to be like on that day during the fast when you know that the addiction has finally been broken, that the alcohol or the smoking or the lust or the pornography or the anger issues have finally been broken, that God has freed you of its power. That is going to be the most amazing day of celebration. God is going to change individual during this campaign.

And I want you to know, God is going to do some amazing things in our church too. As we experience individual miracles, restoration of marriages, healings, and people coming to know Christ for the very first time, there will be a fire ignited in this church that will be unstoppable. And that is what we want. We want to be a church that is an unstoppable force on the eastern side of Lexington. There is no doubt in my mind that as we humble ourselves for a period of forty days of prayer and fasting to wholeheartedly focus and seek God, God will reveal himself to us in ways we can't even imagine.

I believe God has already begun to work. We are seeing lives healed, new commitments to the church, financial blessings happening, and a deepening of people's faith. I want to pray, not that God will move, but that we will be prepared as he moves in our congregation. Before I pray, I'm going to open up the altar and invite anyone that wants to come down and commit yourself to being open to allowing God to move in your life in a major way. There is no music. If you want to come down and ask God to prepare your heart for the amazing miracles he is going to do in your life, please come. If you just want to come and kneel before the Lord to pray, please come.

Fasting 101

Last week we began preparing for an incredible season in the life of our church. On _____ we will enter into a time in which God will mold, shape, and change us as individuals and as a church through a season of forty days of prayer and fasting.

If you were here last week, we jumped into this series on prayer and fasting by giving a definition for fasting. Fasting is the spiritual discipline of refraining from food for a period of time to focus on God. And what we learned is that God expects us to fast periodically. The Bible doesn't say, "If you fast"; it says, "When you fast." So Jesus expects us to fast. And there are a lot of good reasons to fast. There are major spiritual and physical benefits connected to fasting. It is through fasting that we gain clarity, courage, and breakthroughs. In fact, we learned this principle: Fasting helps you focus on God, resulting in extraordinary spiritual and physical benefits.

God is going to do great things during this time of prayer and fasting. I don't doubt that we are going to see great miracles, relationship restored, healings, and people coming to Christ. God has some really great things in store, but the greatest thing God is going to do is to deepen your intimacy with your heavenly Father.

If you have your Bible with you, would you open it to Acts 17? I want you to see something that is so powerful. This is a story about Paul. Paul was traveling with a man named Silas and they were going from area to area talking about Jesus and inviting people to put their faith in Jesus. Paul and Silas got separated and Paul ended up in a city called Athens.

Athens was full of philosophers and people that were very intrigued by religion. Look at the conversation that Paul has with the people in Athens. Verse 23, "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (NIV).

Paul starts off and says, "I realize you are looking for something. And out of all the answers you've found, you haven't found one that sufficiently brings true meaning to life." Then he goes on: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." The God you are looking for is a powerful God and a giving God.

Now listen to this next verse: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." Implication: God decided before you were even born when the best time would be for you to be alive. If you grew up in the 1950s and '60s, God did that intentionally. If you grew up in the 1980s and '90s, there is a reason. There is a reason you are living in Lexington in 2010.

What is the reason? Verse 27 says, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each of us." This is powerful and I don't

want you to miss it. God has you alive at this very time because it was the most conducive time for you to seek your heavenly Father. The reason you weren't alive in the 1800s was because it wasn't the right time for you to seek God. God has placed you on this earth at this very specific time, in this specific place, so you can seek him. And here is the great news: God is near you. God is able to be found. New levels of intimacy are possible and guaranteed because God put you on this earth at exactly the right time for you to find him.

God wants you to seek him.

One of the best ways for us to seek him is during a season of prayer and fasting. So the question we raise is, How do we fast? How does fasting play out in our lives? Today, I want to talk about the nuts and bolts of fasting. I want to talk specifically about how each one of us can participate during this upcoming season. Here is the good news: because there are so many different ways to fast, there is a really good chance you will be able to find a way to participate in this fast. I think as we go through this message, the excitement level in your life is going to increase as you realize you can participate in this spiritual discipline of fasting.

As we jump into this message, let me just remind you of something very important. We are looking at the how-to aspect of fasting, but don't forget that fasting is a spiritual issue; therefore, you need to be praying and asking God how he wants you to fast. You can talk to other people about the stuff we learn today, but no one can tell you how long God wants you to fast and what type of fast you should do. That is between you, God, and your doctor. Let God direct you in your decision. Fasting is a spiritual issue, and God will direct you on how he wants you to fast. Keep that tucked away in the back of your mind as we work our way through this message.

Let's start off by talking about the different types of fasts. The Bible talks about several different types of fasts and lengths of fast. I want to highlight three of them.

One type of fast that we see in the Bible is an *absolute fast*. An absolute fast is an extreme type of fast. When Queen Esther knew that she had to confront the king about a decision he had made and she knew that she could lose her life for confronting the king, she declared an absolute fast. This is what she said in Esther 4:16 (NIV) "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day."

An absolute fast is when you don't eat or drink for three days. Although we see this in the Bible, it is an extreme fast. This type of fast happens when the crisis is so great, you aren't even remotely thinking about food because every fiber of your being is concentrating on God. Depending on your health, this type of fast should only be done under the strict supervision of your doctor. Now that I have your attention, let's talk about the types of fasts that are a little more common.

The next type of fast is called a *normal fast*. Most of us, when we think about fasting, this is the type of fast that we think about. A normal fast is when you only drink water and you refrain from all food for a period of time. This is a fast of a lot of water and no food at all.

This is the type of fast that Jesus practiced. Look at these verses in Luke 4:1–2. This is right after Jesus was baptized. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during

those forty days, and at the end of them he was hungry” (NIV). Don’t you love how honest the Bible is? Just in case we were wondering, yes, Jesus was hungry after fasting for forty days.

A normal fast is when you remove all food from your diet and you stay hydrated on water, lots and lots of water. You buy one of these water bottles in the lobby and you drink as much water as possible. Depending on how long your normal fast is, you might have decided to drink juices and chicken broth. Both of those things will help you with your energy level. If you are feeling really sluggish, drink some juice and it will energize you.

This is where I need to mention that you shouldn’t let the legalistic aspects of fasting crowd out the goal of fasting, which is to deepening your intimacy with God. You make walk into your fast desiring to only drink water, but a few days into the fast, your lack of energy is hindering your ability to focus on God. At that point, drink some juice. It’s okay. You are fasting to deepen your concentration with God, not to be able to say, “I made it a certain number of days on only water.”

For you a normal fast might last for a day; you might decide to go without food and only drink water for twenty-four hours. You might decide to do a three-day normal fast or a seven-day normal fast. We see all different lengths of fasting in the Bible. You may chose to do several twenty-four-hour fasts over the forty-day period of time.

Here is a third type of fast, and I think for a lot of you this going to be really encouraging. The third type of fast is called a *partial fast*. This is when you decide to give up *certain types of food* for a period of time. This is another type of fast that we see in the Bible.

Flip open your Bible to Daniel, chapter 10. The of Daniel is found in the Old Testament, almost at the end of the Old Testament. Daniel was a young boy probably between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, when under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian army conquered Israel and took the best and the brightest back to Babylon. Daniel was one of the people that were taken into captivity. He was in a different culture and was probably a slave.

We know that Daniel was very committed to God and that he was always seeking God and God’s direction. In Daniel, chapter 10, we are told that Daniel receives a vision about a future war and the destruction of Israel. Distraught by what he saw, he begins to fast. Look what it says starting in verse 2, “At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I 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 fasted for twenty-one days by not eating any choice food or meat. What is choice food? Choice foods are delicates. Things like desserts, cakes, cookies, donuts. It’s stuff like breads and croissants, and pastas. It’s rice and other type of carbohydrates. So he ate no choice foods and he ate no meat. So what is left over? Two things: fruits and vegetables. Daniel fasted for twenty-one days, eating only fruits and vegetables. This is an example of a partial fast. It’s not refraining from all food, just certain types of food.

In case you think this is easy, I would encourage you to go three days just eating fruits and vegetables and no comfort food. It’s much more difficult than it sounds. The reality is, it is enough of a change in your diet that it will keep you focused on God.

I've known people that will go on a forty-day partial fast in which they eliminate all candy and dessert from their diet and all caffeine. Because their draw to those types of food is so strong, fasting from it causes them to really deepen their connection to God.

Maybe for you a partial fast would be to eliminate that bowl of ice cream every night. All of us can find something in our diet to fast from. I would just encourage you to make it a sacrifice. If you don't like broccoli, don't go around saying, "I'm on a Daniel fast, and I'm fasting from broccoli." That won't be meaningful at all to you, and it won't help you accomplish the goal of fasting, which is for you to refrain from food for a period of time so you can focus on God.

If you feel led to do a partial fast, take some time and decide what type of food would be a sacrifice for you to give up for a period of time. Whatever you eliminate from your diet, if it means something to you, it is going to mean something to God. It might be breads and pastas. You might do what Daniel did and give up everything except water, fruits, and vegetables. Pray about it, and as God leads you and you stay obedient, God will honor your sacrifice by giving you a deeper intimacy with Him. My hope is that your understanding of fasting is starting to broaden and you are starting to see how it is possible for you to incorporate it into your life.

The two most common types of fasts are normal fasts and partial fasts. The length of time that you do them varies. We are about to enter into a season of forty days of praying and fasting. Some of you might decide that you want to do a normal fast for forty days. Others of you might decided you want to do a Daniel fast for forty days. You might decide to do a combination of the two types of fasts.

I have had people come to me and say, "At the beginning of the forty days I am going to do a twenty-four-hour normal fast. And then a week later I am going to do a twenty-one-day partial fast in which I just eat fruits and vegetables." Someone else mentioned to me they are going to do a normal fast on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays during the campaign. You might choose to do a three-day fast or a twenty-one-day partial fast.

There are no hard and fast rules. We are just asking people to pray and ask God what he wants you to do and then be obedient. If you have never fasted before, don't jump into this and try a forty-day normal fast. Take it slow. As you try fasting and experience the blessings connected to it, it will become something that you start to include in your life on a more regular basis.

We've talked about the two most common types of fasts and how the length of your fast isn't set in stone. Let me tell you a little bit more about what you can expect from your body as you fast and then give you some practical steps to get started.

The length of your fast will determine the types of things you will experience. Let me just mention up front that you will not wither away to nothing on your fast. You will not start fasting and one day walk outdoors and be blown away by the wind. That will not happen.

The other thing that will not happen is that your body won't eat itself. I heard someone say once, "I don't fast because I heard that when you start fasting your body begins to consume its own organs." That will not happen. It is true that when you start fasting, your body begins to break down the fat deposits for energy. Do you know that one pound of fat contains thirty-five hundred calories? Thirty-five hundred calories is more than your recommended daily caloric

intake by fifteen hundred calories. Your body is going to be fine as you fast as long as you are wise and you consult your doctor.

However, it is good to know some of the things that will happen to your body on a fast. Depending on the length of your fast there are certain things you can expect. The first thing you can expect as you fast is hunger pains. I know that seems obvious, but I mention it because hunger pains don't indicate you are starving to death. Our stomach has the mentality of a two year old: if it makes enough noise, it will get attention. For most of us, our appetite is very spoiled, and as soon as we start to feel discomfort, we give in.

As you start your fast, it's going to take your appetite some time to learn that it's not going to get its way. I encourage people to let their hunger pains and stomach growls be a reminder to pray. The goal of fasting is to focus on God. And an easy way to keep your focus on God is to use your hunger pains as a reminder to pray. The stronger the hunger pains, the more passionately you should pray. If you will use your hunger pains as a reminder to pray, the first couple days on your fast you will experience the joy of praying without ceasing.

The other thing I encourage people to do when they experience hunger pains is drink water. Water is a great purifier, and it's a great filler on a fast. The more water you keep in your system, the less hungry you will feel.

Something else you can expect on a fast is headaches. I mentioned last week that when you fast, your body begins to detoxify. All the toxins that you have inside you begin to make their way out. So you can expect headaches, bad breath, and even a weird film that forms on your tongue. I know that sounds gross, but just look at it as the cost of increased health and deeper intimacy with God. Your body is going through positive changes during that time. Weight loss will happen at this stage of the fast.

Those are some of the things you can expect the first three days of a fast. The first three days are the worst. Your concentration isn't real strong. You will feel sluggish. Some of you will be grumpy. It will be hard to pray and read your Bible. There isn't a whole lot that is enjoyable during those first three days. If you chose to do a fast that is three days or less, you really have to work hard at concentrating deeply on God. I would encourage you not to watch much TV during this time. If you sit around and watch TV, you are going to drive yourself crazy with food commercials. When fasting, I've noticed that TV commercials makes me crave stuff that I never eat.

If you feel led to fast for more than three days, this is what you can expect. The headaches will begin to subside. That happens because you are breaking your dependency on caffeine and your body is continuing to detoxify. Around days four and five, you will start to feel less sluggish. There will be times you might feel dizzy and lightheaded, and that is a reminder to slow down some. One of the great aspects of fasting is that you slow down some and become more intentional in what you do. At this stage, you may want to consider drinking juice or chicken broth for energy.

If you continue to fast, by day five and six you will hit a sweet spot. It is at this stage of the fast that you become very alert. At this stage of the fast, you become very sensitive to the presence of God in your life. Most people, if they can hit this stage, feel like they can fast indefinitely. This is

a very powerful place to be on your fast. Hunger pains are hardly even noticeable. Your digestive track is getting a break, and your immune system is strengthening. There are a lot of very positive things happening at this stage. Remember to continue to drink plenty of water. I would encourage you to slow down your exercise program. You can continue to do all your other activities, but be wise. Your body won't have as much energy as it usually does.

If you continue your fast, the hunger pains will begin to return in days twenty-one to forty. It is at this stage that you need to listen to your body and prepare to break your fast. Hunger pains at this stage usually mean that your body is entering into the first stages of starvation, having used up all of its reserves.

Those are a few of the things you can expect to happen.

So, how do you get prepared? What are the things you can do in preparation for the beginning of this season of prayer and fasting? The way you approach your fast is really important. If you walk into the fast with the mentality, "I will fast but I don't really want to," you won't get anything out of it.

Here are a few suggestions.

First, decide why you want to fast. Set your goal for the fast. Be very specific about the reason or the reasons you are fasting. Are you fasting for clarity about a decision you need to make. Are you fasting for courage? Are you fasting to experience a deeper level of intimacy with God? Are you fasting so you can spend more time praying for the salvation of your kids or grandkids? Before you start your fast, you need to make a decision about why you want to fast. The reason this is so important is that it will become the motivating factor throughout your fast. When you want to give up, you can come back to your reason for fasting to stay motivated. So decide why you want to fast.

Second, determine the type and length of your fast. Are you going to do a normal fast? Are you going to do a partial fast? Are you going to do a combination of the two? This is when you pray and really seek God about the type and length of fast God wants you to do.

Third, prepare physically for the fast. Now is not the time to gorge yourself on food. On the night before your fast starts, don't eat everything in the pantry. Don't go out to eat and pound down everything you desire. If you plan on fasting for more than three days, you need to reduce your caloric intake before the fast starts. Eat smaller meals.

Fourth, establish a schedule for your fast. Remember that the goal of the fast is to deepen intimacy with God. If your schedule is to merely endure twenty-four hours blocks of time, you will miss the mark. I would encourage you to replace meal times with prayer and reading your Bible. During your breakfast time, you may choose to pray. During lunch, you may want to read and study the Bible. And during dinner time, you may want to pray and journal. I really encourage you to establish a schedule during your fast. Don't use the time you would be eating to be filled with work. This is where the twenty-one-day journal will come in handy.

Finally, prepare spiritually. Start praying about your goals before you start your fast. Begin to anticipate that God will move in your life in some amazing ways.

I've tried to briefly explain the nuts and bolts of fasting. We've looked at the types of fasts and what to expect physically as you fast. I've given you some ideas on how to prepare for your fast. I'm sure you still have some questions. I really want to encourage you to go to the church's Web site and join the discussion forum. That is a place where we can encourage one another and ask questions. I think it will become a great resource during the fast.

Let me mention to you, fasting will disrupt the business-as-usual life that you live. It will create new time to pray, and it will push you to deepen your dependency on God. Fasting itself is continual prayer before God. There will be times during your fast that all heaven will open up. There will be times when you will gain focus and clarity that you've been longing for. If you are tired of your business-as-usual life or if you are longing for something more, join us in this season of prayer and fasting.

God has great miracles in store for our church. We are going to see things that will awe all of us. Your relationship with God will reach a new level of intimacy. Relationships are going to be restored. People are going to gain the clarity they've longed for. God is going to heal some lives. It's not going to be easy, but the blessings are going to be abundant.

Celebrate What You've Learned

This morning I want us to celebrate what God has taught us about himself during this time of fasting and prayer. Look at this verse from Deuteronomy 11:2 (GNT). Let's read this together, "Remember today what you have learned about the Lord through your experiences with Him."

When you were growing up, how many of you ever touched a hot stove or a hot iron? No matter how many times your parents told you not to do it, the only way you learned was through personal experience. There are some things that no matter how many times people tell you something or how many times you read something, you can only learn through experience.

During this season of prayer and fasting, many of us have learned some new things through personal experience. Some of the lessons that we have learned as a congregation are things we've read about or heard from other people, but now we have experienced it for ourselves. In fact, 178 of you signed up to fast some way, somehow during this season of prayer and fasting. And if you experienced something new or learned something new, would you look at the person next to you and say, "I did." We all have experienced something new or re-experienced something with God and it has been powerful. And God teaches us that we need to stop, celebrate, and remember what we have learned about the Lord through your experience with him.

So what are some of the things we've learned and we can celebrate from this time of prayer and fasting?

One thing we have learned is that **we can truly hunger and thirst for God**. Another way of saying this is, we can have a deep craving for God.

The one thing that caught me off guard was how God has created a hunger and thirst for him. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about how Christians will be blessed, they will be happy, when they hunger and thirst for righteousness. When believers crave righteousness above everything else, they will be filled.

Prior to this fast I had heard those words, and I knew what it meant to desire God, but deeply craving God, hunger and thirsting for him, was a different story. I knew what it was like to have a desire and a passion for God, but a hunger and thirst is a different feeling. I know what it means to crave pizza, cheeseburgers, onion rings, fries, Mexican food, Chinese food. I understand that craving. However, through this fast we have learned what it means to crave God.

Listen to this quote that I received. This is from someone that was learning to crave God more than food. The person said, "I didn't want to give up on what I know God is doing in my life all because I decided to give up my emotional crutch, which is food, and lean completely on him. It is through this fast that I am experiencing growing pains. I am growing spiritually, and being closer to God is far better than ice cream." Before this fast, I could have used that quote and a lot of people would have said, "Whatever. Sure you crave God more than ice cream." But now we know that it's true. We can have a deep craving for God.

Look at this verse from Psalms 34:8. Let's read this one aloud together. "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him" (NIV). God satisfies unlike any food can satisfy. Remember the old Snickers slogan: "Snickers really satisfies." So many of us have now experienced that only God can produce deep satisfaction.

That new hunger and thirst for God has changed the way we approach God. During this forty days, we had two anointing and healing services. God performed some amazing miracles during those services, and I will talk about them in a moment. But what I will never forget about those nights is the longing and eagerness that I saw in people for a fresh touch of God in their lives. They came with great expectation that God was going to show up in their lives. Listen to what this person said the day after the anointing service:

Last night's service was an amazing time of togetherness with God. Seeing people gather to experience God in action was very humbling. As I watched people approach the altar for healing, I thought of how badly I wanted to see God blessing their lives. As I left, I wished more people had gotten to experience that as well. I think sometimes we believe that we don't want to bother God with our needs, but 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV) says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Last night was a reminder of how much he loves us and reaches out to us individually with individual needs.

The newfound craving for God also caused many people to make some meaningful commitments. I'm going to read off a list of commitments that you could have made during this forty-day season of prayer and fasting. If I mention something that you committed to doing, would you please stand up after I read this list?

If you committed to doing some type of fast and you fasted, if you helped with the egg project, if you attended a Sunday morning class or started attending a Sunday morning class, if you did the prayer walk, if you helped hand out with the door hangers (about seventy-five of you showed up to do that last week), if you committed to be involved in the financial campaign, if you helped with the Neighbor to Neighbor project, if you recently started attending our church, if you have recently started volunteering in any capacity, if you have recently made a commitment or rededication to Jesus Christ, or if you have increased your spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading your Bible—if you made any of those commitments, please stand up.

Through this campaign, God has taught us how to hunger and thirst for him. Truth be told, God is looking for people who will do more than just show up for another church service. God is looking for people who will hunger for the things God has placed in them.

As we entered into this time of fasting, I mentioned to you that the greatest thing God would do during this season was to deepen our intimacy with him. Right before we started this time of fasting, we showed a video of Randy Sewell; in that video, he said that fasting is like a turbo charger for your prayer life. Some many of us have experienced the truth of that statement. Fasting has supercharged our prayer life. I've had person after person tell me that they are praying more now than they have ever prayed. People are telling me they are reading their Bible more now than they have ever read their Bible. This week someone sent me an e-mail that said, "It has created a new sense of a deepened relationship with God and allowed us to focus on him much more than before." I expected that God would take us to a whole different level of spiritually during this time. We have

learned what it means to crave God deeply. We have also learned that when we do crave God, he completely satisfies.

Here is the second thing we learned during this season of prayer and fasting. We learned that **God is still in the miracle business.**

As you read through the Bible, you see miracle after miracle after miracle. God parted major bodies of water. The prophet Elijah would pray that it would no longer rain and it stopped raining for three and a half years; then he prayed again and it started raining. A warrior prayed for the sun to keep shining and God honored the prayer. Jesus and the disciples prayed for people to be physically healed and they were. Peter walked on water. Over and over again we see miracles in Scripture. Miracles were just part of life.

However, when you fast forward a couple thousand years to 2010, it's easy to wonder, Is God still performing miracles? As we approach day forty of this campaign, you don't have to wonder if God is still performing miracles; you know he is still in the miracle business because we've seen it with our own eyes.

We have people who were on blood pressure medication that have come off of it completely and are still off it. We have heard about people that had irregular heartbeats that are now completely regular and about diabetics whose blood sugar level has leveled out. I spoke to someone the other day whose joy has returned. I spoke to a spouse who told me for years she has been praying for her husband to be a spiritual leader in the home, and now he is initiating the spiritual conversations.

Listen to this story:

On the day the fast began, a series of events and meetings were beginning in a different part of the world. These events were on the very top of the list of reasons I felt called to fast. Lives literally hang in the balance. Last night I got an e-mail that an unthinkable and unbelievable miracle had occurred. The circumstances cannot be publicly disclosed on a message board, but things have happened that have never happened before, and it opens the door to possibilities on a scale that cannot be measured—read that God-sized. God has answered a prayer with a YES that can only occur when he steps in and changes the earthly rules. Based on the human experience, what has happened was considered impossible...until now! God likes to show up, and God likes to show off! He's doing both, and I am on cloud nine.

I'm so excited about the miracles God has been performing that I asked someone to come and share what God has done in her life during this time of prayer and fasting.

[Esther's story.]

There are so many things God has done during this prayer and fasting campaign. God is a miracle-working God and nothing is impossible for him. Psalm 77:14 (NIV) states, "You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples." God is still in the miracle-working business.

I don't think it's appropriate to talk about the amazing things God has done and not stop to worship him. I've asked the worship team to come back up and lead us in a song of gratitude. I want to ask that you would sing this next song with a deep sense of gratitude for what God has been doing in the life of our church.

[song]

Here is the third thing we have learned about God during this time of prayer and fasting: **often the blessings follow the fast.**

In the Old Testament book of Joel, when the Israelites were facing destruction, God instructed them to do the following in 1:14 (NIV), "Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD." Two more times God called the Israelites to fast. Fasting put the Israelites in line with God's will and God's desires. Fasting humbled them so that they would follow and do the things God wanted them to do.

Listen to the results that happened after the fast. 2:19 (NIV), "The Lord will reply to them: 'I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.'" And in verses 23–24, it says, "Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten...You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God." The blessing often times follows the fast.

Many of you felt lead to do a three-, seven-, or twenty-one-day fast. And because your fast is over, you have been experiencing the blessings. Last week as I stood in the lobby, a dad came up to me and said that he fasted for his son to get a good job. His fast finished on a Tuesday, and that Friday, his son was contacted with a really good job offer.

Two weeks ago I challenged our church to move from praying typical prayers to praying big prayers. That week I got an e-mail from someone in our church telling me that part of his fast was about getting a job. He contacted an employer, he was asked to come in and interview, and they hired him on the spot. One of the young adults in our church submitted a résumé three months ago for a job. She began praying and fasting and three months later she got a call: the employer said, "Um, we don't know if you are still interested, but we would like to offer you a job." Coincidence? I don't think so.

So often, the blessings follow the fast. The child you've been praying for finally comes to Christ. The stronghold that you long to be broken happens falls after the fast. The job offers comes a few weeks after the fast. The healing occurs months after the fast. God is going to honor your fast. There will be blessings that happen to you this year because of your obedience in the fast.

We have learned so much through this experience of prayer and fasting. So the natural question becomes, where do we go from here? Let me give you a couple suggestions. For those of you that God has called you to fast for the full forty days, don't grow weary now. You only have six more days to go. Continue to depend on God for strength. Continue to trust that God is not done doing

all that he wants to do and the next six days are going to be just as powerful as the first thirty-four days.

For those of you who have finished your fast, I hope you hold onto these words from Philippians 4:9 (NIV), “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” The apostle Paul was speaking to the church in Philippi. They had learned some new things from Paul, and Paul was encouraging them not to stop doing the new things that were so beneficial for them.

All of us have learned new things on this fast. We’ve learned that fasting is an amazing spiritual discipline. We’ve learned to deepen our dependency on God and not trust in other things first. We’ve learned the importance of giving meaningful time to reading the Bible and praying. We’ve learned better ways to encourage one another. Why would you go back to your old ways of life? Just because you start eating again doesn’t mean you neglect the new habits that you’ve learned during this campaign.

Keep that extra prayer time that you’ve established with God. Stay immersed in the Bible. Continue to encourage one another and pray for each other. The habits that God has begun to sow into your life, continue to develop them. They are incredible gifts that God has given to you.

Here is my third suggestion. Pass on what you’ve learned. One of the most fundamental truths of life is that you only keep what you give away. You will not retain the things you’ve learned unless you pass them on. God has not designed you to be a reservoir. He has designed you to be a river. As you have experienced things during this fast, you will be blessed as you pass those things on to others. Share the truth that God has given to you. Write someone a letter or send them an e-mail. Bring them to church. Don’t keep what you’ve learned to yourself. God wants you to share it.