

Joining Jesus in the Wilderness

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 Title: Why the Wilderness? – The Wilderness is a place of Deprivation
 Text: Luke 4:1-15 (Key verses: 1, 2, 13-15)
 Theme: “For forty days, being tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:2)

Introduction:

Last week we considered the idea of solitude in the wilderness. This week I would like us to consider the idea of deprivation, of going without.

Why the need?

We are a culture that is satiated by the abundance of things. We consistently over eat, over spend, and over commit. We have sensory overload and are glutted with the good, but woefully undernourished by the best.

Why the greed for food and gluttonous patterns of eating? What fear drives us to hoard and to consume in quantities that propel us to spiritual lethargy? If drunkenness is wrong and sexual promiscuity is wrong, and substance abuse and dependency is wrong, then why is gluttony spiritually acceptable? Living in the land of plenty does have disadvantages.

Everything we do services self. **We have time for everything, but nothing gets done. We are always over eating but are Bible starved. We are always over committing, but have no time for church or ministry. We are always over spending, but have nothing to give to the mission of Christ in and through His church.** We have become so enamored by the good that we have lost our way as it relates to the best. We are still in that freefall where we have deceived ourselves in believing everything is okay when in reality we are blind to Christ.

Why do we fear the fast? Are we like the impoverished child who, when given an endless supply of food, gobbles it down as if tomorrow it will not be there?

What are we to do about it?

The Bible often speaks of fasting. The Hebrew word used for fasting “conveys the explicit meaning ‘to abstain from food’ and thus occurs regularly as a technical religious term.” (Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible, Eugene H. Merrill, “Fast, Fasting,” 245)

“[However] there’s nothing magical about fasting. It’s just one way of telling God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with him, sorting out whatever is necessary, and you have canceled the meal, party, concert, or whatever else you had planned to do in order to fulfill that priority.” Your Father Loves You by James Packer, (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986), page for June 14

To fast is to refuse the good in order to pursue the best. It is not simply saying no to the flesh (from which we are always running) but from the weights of life that would chain us to the temporal. It is only as we simplify our lives and live singularly focused on Him and His kingdom that we are freed from the temporal and are able to take flight into the eternal.

The wilderness provides us the opportunity to say no to the good in order to realign ourselves with what is best. How you live is not the point. The issue is your motive in why you live.

Jesus fasted for 40 days, but why? His motive was not to acquire something He was lacking but rather to enjoy something He possessed. Going without, fasting, has the power to heighten our awareness of who God is, what He has done, and who we are in Him. There is clarity in fasting. Ears once stopped are unlocked. Eyes once blinded are opened.

Most commentaries speak little of our Lord fasting. Why did He fast? What was His intent? What was He hoping to gain or secure through the fast? Why would I fast? Our lives are drowning in a sea of the unimportant.

The purpose of the wilderness has several aspects. One of the aspects to the wilderness was to remove the “clutter” and to focus more intentionally on God and His purposes. In principle, the same reasons as to why Jesus went into the wilderness are the same reasons as to why we should go into the wilderness.

The conclusion we will come to is best stated by Eugene Merrill when he notes,

“The purpose of fasting . . . suggests a self-denial that opens one to God and to the immaterial aspects of life. Inasmuch as food and drink typify life in the flesh and all its demands and satisfactions, their absence or rejection speaks to the reality of a higher dimension, one in which the things of the spirit predominate. The theology of fasting, then, is a theology of priorities in which believers are given the opportunity to express themselves in an undivided and intensive devotion to the Lord and to the concerns of the spiritual life.” (Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible, Eugene H. Merrill, “Fast, Fasting,” 246)

Richard Foster comments in *Celebration of Discipline*:

“Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained...Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by ‘every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Matt. 4:4)...Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!”

It is for this reason that we are seeking to join Jesus in the wilderness.

- A. The wilderness is a place of deprivation (v. 2 [He ate nothing])
 - a. Deprivation negatively considered

The devil attacked at the most favorable time. The devil attacks us at our weakest points, yet Paul tells us that we are to glory in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

- b. Deprivation positively considered

Let us consider the idea of fasting. Fasting simply speaks of self-restraint. Fasting seeks to make time for God. Deprivation can be used to eliminate the clutter in one's life.

When Jesus went into the wilderness was His intent to fast? Or was His fast a result of His intense focus on the Father? I believe both reasons can exist as occasioning a fast. I would like us to consider the biblical revelation as it relates to fasting and see where it will lead us. We will categorize our study around the two larger bodies of revelation; the Old and New Testaments.

I. Fasting in the Old Testament

There are four companions to fasting that appear to summarize fasting in the Old Testament.

- A. Fasting often accompanies a spirit of contrition

Fasting and repentance are often coupled together. It was/is an expression of earnestness in turning to the Lord (1 Sam. 7:6). The fast was to assist in hearing God (Jud. 20:26). Jonah's message of judgment was met by the people of Nineveh with fasting (3:5). Joel is often cited as a man who calls for fasting as an expression of repentance and pursuit (Joel 1:14, 2:12, 15). Tremendous remorse over personal and national sin was often accompanied by a period of fasting. The grief could be so great that the thought of food leaves the individual.

The Psalms speak of fasting as an expression of humility (Pss. 35:13, 69:10, 109:24).

- B. Fasting often accompanies a spirit of petition

When David's child born from adultery was dying, he fasted in order to save the child's life (2 Sam. 12:16, 21-23). Daniel is noted as a man who fasted (Dan. 9:3). His fasting is coupled with contrition and petition.

- C. Fasting often accompanies a spirit of desperation

When the nation of Judah faced destruction at the hands of her enemies, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in order to beseech God for His intervention in their behalf (2 Chron. 20:3).

When Ezra the priest brought back a remnant of people after the Babylonian Captivity, he proclaimed a fast in order to beseech God for His intervention in their behalf (Ezra 8:21, 23). During this same period of time Nehemiah and his contemporaries issued a fast in order to beseech God for His intervention in their behalf (Neh. 1:4, 9:1). The same happened in the days of Esther (Esther 4:3, 4:16, 9:31) when the people of God were on the brink of annihilation.

D. Fasting often accompanies a spirit of compassion

Isaiah 58 provides fasting as not simply the absence of comfort but the opportunity for good. Fasting in Isaiah is only found in chapter 58. Here it is claimed “that if fasting was to be of value, it must be accompanied by compassion and a concern for social justice.” (The Oxford Companion to the Bible, John N. Suggit, “Fasting,” 225)

II. Fasting in the New Testament

In the New Testament there are two distinct aspects; the people who fasted and the pattern for fasting.

A. The people who fasted

1. Jesus fasted for up to 40 days and nights (Matt. 4:2).
2. Paul fasted (Acts 9:9)
3. The early church fasted (Acts 13:2, 3, 14:23).

Acts 13:2-3 “While they were ministering to the Lord and **fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had **fasted** and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”

Acts 14:23 “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with **fasting**, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Fasting was a part of the early church’s expression of singularity as it related to God (Acts 14:23, 1 Cor. 7:5). It appears to be a common practice and a part of the Christian’s relationship with God. It was/is a means of hearing God’s voice (Acts 13:2, 3).

Although fasting has certain objective standards its value is measured subjectively and individually. Fasting is not controlled by duration or severity. Fasting has as its only standard a pursuit of God.

The issue with fasting is not one of duration or even severity, but of motive. We need to be creative in our desire for intimacy with God. The idea of fasting seems only to spotlight food, but going without in other areas is equally important. Restricting our gratification of self is important because **without even knowing it our servants become our masters**. Technology has subtly crept in and taken over. We are information junkies whose eyes are plastered to the TV screen and our ears hear nothing but the empty chatter on cell phones. **Fasting enables us to cut off the demons of distraction** and enables us to open ourselves up to the clarion call of God to and for His people.

Unless and until we check ourselves through our overindulgence we will continue to live in a land of spiritual famine and draught, but its impact is often left unseen and untreated. God calls us to taste and see that He is good. And perhaps one of the means whereby this will take place is when we put the gift back into the servant role and see that God is more pleasing and satisfying than anything created.

B. The pattern for fasting

1. A pattern of privacy (Matt. 6:16-18).

Here we can answer the question **“How should I fast?”**

- I should fast **quietly** (You should carry out your normal daily routines).
- I should fast **privately** (No one should know. There should be no public fanfare).
- I should fast **intentionally** (There is a reason as to why you would fast. This also answers the question, “When should I fast?”).

I repeat, “The issue with fasting is not one of duration or even severity, but of motive.” Sometimes fasting is intentional for the purpose of clearing the eye of faith to see farther than it previously has. Sometimes fasting is consequential in that while in the quest for Christ food is forgotten. Either way, food takes its rightful place as servant and ceases to be our master.

If we say “I will eat and/or drink nothing but ____ for ____ days,” we set ourselves up for spiritual failure. By stating a duration and degree we make those two items the focus, whereas by setting Christ as the object of our hunt food takes its place and its absence becomes secondary. Issues of duration and severity must be left to moment and not be legislated by the individual or some “book” on fasting.

Thus, there is no set length as to what constitutes a biblical fast. A fast could be 12 hours, 24 hours, days, weeks, or perhaps more than a month. The length of fast is controlled by what God chooses to do in you and through you to those around you.

Although the nation of Israel was often called to national fasts and at times the early church fasted, there is still a private aspect to the fast that is to be just that, private. Often we want people to know we are fasting because it sounds so “spiritual.” But to seek such recognition is to violate the motive as to why you would fast in the first place.

2. A pattern of prayerfulness (Matt. 17:21, Mark 9:29, Luke 2:37, Acts 14:23, 1 Cor. 7:5).

Fasting was a means of beseeching God for His intervention in their behalf (Matt. 17:21, Mark 9:29). Fasting, like prayer, is one of those activities that God has chosen to work through in the accomplishing of His purpose. I cannot explain fasting any more than I can explain prayer only in so far that it is something I should be engaging in on a regular basis. And both find meaningful exercise **only as it expresses itself as a fruit of the Spirit.**

Fasting is not simply a spiritual discipline or exercise. Fasting is one of the means God has chosen to accomplish His end. Not to fast is to miss one of the blessings God has for His people in the working out of His will in and through them.

3. A pattern of personal piety

Fasting was an expression of religious intensity and piety (Luke 2:37, 18:12, Acts 14:23). This same idea is seen in Acts 9:9 where the apostle Paul went three days neither eating nor drinking immediately following his encounter with Christ. Fasting is a work of the Holy Spirit in and through His people. To say spiritual people fast is the same as saying spiritual people pray or read their Bible or exhibit self-control. It is simply a fruit of the Holy Spirit that He is working in and through His people.

I believe fasting is something that God may lead individuals or a church family to participate in. It is not something that is to be legislated, mandatory, or regulated, but it is something that is to be encouraged.

“Without exception [fasting] has to do with a sense of need and dependence, of [wretched] helplessness in the face of actual or anticipated calamity.” (Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible, Eugene H. Merrill, “Fast, Fasting,” 246)

Fasting, like prayer, is not so much an expression of my determination or discipline, but rather of my desperation. I need God and an expression of that need is fasting.

In conclusion, let us consider two practical questions as it relates to fasting.

APPLICATION:

What are the wrong reasons for a fast?

1. In order to lose weight. You might fast to lose weight, but this is not a biblical fast.
2. In order to work more at the “job.”
3. In order to show God how serious you are.
4. In order to show others how much you love God.
5. In order to manipulate God into giving you what you want.

Why consider fasting?

1. In order to express worship of God.
2. In order to cleanse your body and soul of the clutter that detracts and distracts you from God.
3. In order to spend time to pray and meditate on who God is, what He has done, and who you are in Him.
4. In order to reconcile strained relationships on a horizontal level.
5. In order to reprioritize the importance of your relationship with God.
6. In order to ask God for specific items of concern that burden your spirit.