

PRAYER

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FASTING

A 40 DAY GUIDE





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An Invitation to Fasting

One time Jesus was asked, “How is it that...your disciples do not fast?” (Matthew 9:14). It was a good question. At that time, many others fasted—the Pharisees and their disciples, John the Baptist and his disciples. But not Jesus’ disciples. Jesus said it was because he was still with them, so his group should feel more ‘wedding’ than ‘funeral’. But, he said, “the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and *then they will fast.*”

So, would you like to join me in 40 days of fasting?

This may seem like an unusual invitation. To some it sounds Catholic. To others it sounds cultish. To others it sounds compelling, but for reasons that have little to do with Jesus of Nazareth. Fasting is practiced by nearly every religion under heaven, including Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and more. It’s practiced by the non-religious too, who praise fasting for its health benefits and its aid to mental clarity.

I’m actually not interested in pursuing fasting for any of those associations. The bottom line for me is that I want to step deeper into fasting as a way of stepping deeper in discipleship to Jesus. Jesus fasted; the Spirit led him into fasting (Matthew 4:1-4). And Jesus taught that his disciples would fast too. “When you fast,” he said, not “if you fast” (6:16). *Do you want to go deeper?*

While most Christians in most places have regularly fasted, that’s not the case here and now. Why is that?

The reasons are different now than they were in 1st century Palestine. Now our hesitancy to fast has more to do with an overgrown appetite. Indulgence in America is a runaway train. As one friend told me, “It’s simple, we don’t want to fast because it’s hard.” Fair enough. And sure, some of our hesitancy may be related to an overreach in some Catholic practices during the Middle Ages. No one wants to imitate Simon the Stylite, chaining himself to a column to ensure his 40-day feat of fasting. But our reluctance to fasting seems also to grow out of an innate resistance to our embodiment. “We’ve got a body problem,” *Fasting* author Scot McKnight says. Maybe it’s a holdover from the Enlightenment age we’re coming out of or a precursor to the digital age of the metaverse we’re heading into, but either way the body is treated like an afterthought to authenticity. We imagine that we can walk out our discipleship without our bodies.

The reality, of course, is far different than the reasons for our reluctance. The truth is that we are embodied, and the most authentic experiences we have are as whole persons—heart, soul, mind, and strength. The truth is that the history of the Church has great wisdom to help keep us anchored in Christ. The truth is that some of the greatest joys I have in life are the hardest things I’ve ever taken on. The truth is that that our appetites are not fully satisfied by our indulgence.

You may be thinking, “I’m open to fasting, but 40 days is extreme!” So, keep in mind a few things about this invitation. First, it’s an invitation, not an obligation. Love is the measure of the Christian life, not a lack of food. Second, it’s a customizable invitation to fast at your own pace a few days a week, *not 40 days straight*. Third, it’s an invitation to practice prayer and fasting with a community of disciples at Oikos Church. We’re here to encourage, remind, celebrate, and praise our God with you for all the ways He shows up in this journey.

So, would you like to join me on this 40-day journey? May God move among us.

God bless,
Smith



Week 1: Set-Up

What is Fasting?

Fasting is fairly straightforward in this journey—it is *abstaining from food and/or drink for a spiritual purpose*. During week 1 you'll finalize your plans for what you will give up during Lent. While forgoing Netflix, social media, or shopping may be helpful to your spiritual life, this 40-day journey is one of fasting from food and/or drink.

To help you discern, let's look at the purpose of fasting and several types of fasts.

THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

In his book *Fasting*, Scot McKnight offers this definition—"Fasting is a person's whole-body, natural *response* to life's sacred moments" (italics added). The word "response" is important.

Many think of fasting for its *results*, such as weight loss, mental clarity, self-discipline, or spiritual breakthrough. This may be confusing because there are blessings and breakthroughs on the other side of a fast. These are real benefits to fasting, but, biblically speaking, fasting is not about the results. Fasting is a *response*. If we don't fast for results, why do they keep coming?

Do you remember the story of Elijah's showdown on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal? The false prophets cried, raved, and cut themselves to get their gods to notice them. "Perhaps your god is relieving himself," Elijah mocked. And then Elijah calmly prayed, and the water-logged altar erupted in fire from heaven (1 Kings 18). This is a helpful frame for seeing fasting. God is not manipulated by our pain, but He is moved by our prayers.

Our fasting is not an instrument to coax God into listening to us or to get things from Him. He is eager to listen and help. Our High Priest always lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). Jesus taught us to ask, seek, and knock because our Father wills to give good gifts to those who ask him (Matthew 7:7-11). He wills our God *and* He is moved by our seeking. Fasting is part of our whole-person, fully-embodied way of seeking the Lord. Fasting, McKnight says, is "body talk." When we fast, we don't simply just *think* about God, our bellies and bodies become engaged in the pursuit of Him. When we fast, we do not just *speak* our requests to "life's sacred moments," we *feel* them physically and viscerally.

LIFE'S SACRED MOMENTS

Fasting is the bodily pursuit of God in response to "life's sacred moments." What are these? In Scripture, fasting was a natural response to difficult moments, often with sackcloth and ashes. When someone's sin was exposed, the humble person fasted. When someone experienced some kind of suffering, such as sickness or the death of a friend, the natural response was to fast. When God felt distant or a person needed discernment, the response was to fast. When someone came to the end of themselves and had no one else to rely on, they fasted. When someone remembered a holy movement of God to deliver and atone, they often fasted.

This guide will provide reflections for each of these "sacred moments."

- Week 1: Set-Up
- Week 2: Sin
- Week 3: Suffering
- Week 4: Separation
- Week 5: Self-Reliance
- Week 6: Salvation



Your 40-Day Fast

TYPES OF FASTS

Fasting isn't exactly one-size-fits-all. In Scripture there are multiple types of fasts—normal, partial, and absolute. Each type can vary in length.

- A *normal* fast is giving up food—but not giving up water—for a designated period of time. In Scripture, the most common normal fast was sunup to sundown (12-hours). During this season, we're encouraging at least one day a week where you fast from food for a time.
- A *partial* fast is giving up a particular type of food and/or drink for a designated period of time. In Scripture, Daniel only ate water and vegetables for a time (10 days and 21 days).
- An *absolute* fast is giving up food *and* water for a designated period of time. In Scripture, the fast before the Day of Atonement was from sundown to sundown (24 hours).

40 DAYS?

Our fasting together will, Lord willing, begin on Tuesday, February 28, and will end 40 days later on April 8, the Saturday before Resurrection Sunday.

Why 40 days? The early disciples began to honor the 40-day season before Passover with fasting and prayer. As Augustine argued, Moses fasted for 40 days in the Law (twice, actually), Elijah for 40 days in the prophets, and Jesus for 40 days in the Gospels, so the whole Bible testified to the fast. Nearly all Christians everywhere fasted during this season.

As rigorous as the early Christians often were about fasting during Lent, they did make some exceptions. Fasting on the Lord's Day (Sunday) was not allowed. Most did not fast on the Sabbath (Saturday), except on the day after Good Friday, "Holy Saturday" as it's called.

At Oikos, we're embracing the 40 days of Lent as a season, not a strict plan. Let's be clear: we're not asking anyone to fast for 40 days straight. Instead, you're invited to fast at least once a week for the 40 days leading up to Easter. We encourage you to break your fast on the weekends to remember the rest of God and the resurrection of Jesus. We are not aiming for an accomplishment to boost our spiritual ego or pride; we are aiming for nearness to God.

CHOOSE YOUR FAST

For health concerns, job requirements, family needs, or other reasons, our fasting will take different forms and frequencies. That's up to each person to decide. We are recommending 4 different options for fasting in this 6-week journey.

- *Option 1: Fridays.* Practice a normal fast from Thursday evening until Friday evening.
- *Option 2: Wednesdays and Fridays.* Practice a normal fast from sunrise to sundown on Wednesdays and Fridays.
- *Option 3: Weekdays.* Practice a normal fast from sunrise to sundown every weekday.
- *Option 4: Create your own plan.* Customize any of the options above, or make your own.

For those with children, consider how to include them. We have also created a family fasting guide to help equip you. If they are included, involve them in the decision making and in the reflection time throughout the journey. Even if you're not including them, it may be helpful to talk about why you're not eating at meals. Perhaps the Lord will grow their desire for discipleship to Jesus by seeing you go deeper.

- *Family Option 1: Wednesdays and Fridays.* Practice a partial fast of no desserts or no meat on Wednesdays and Fridays. Make sure to break your fast with something yummy!
- *Family Option 2: Fridays.* Practice an adapted normal fast on Fridays by serving an after-school snack, having a devotional instead of dinner, and then a bedtime snack.



Getting Ready

PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before you begin, remember Jesus' warnings about fasting for earthly rewards. He says you will get them, but you forfeit the reward of God Himself (Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18). If you're fasting with your family or Oikos Group, keep a check on comparison, pride, envy, and recognition. Instead of asking about the differences in your plans, ask about the insights the Lord awakens.

As you determine your fast, remember the importance of keeping your commitments. Our word matters. God honors small beginnings, so don't feel the need to impress or overstretch yourself. And remember that God is gracious and merciful, understanding our weakness. If you slip, hop back up and keep going. Like a parent with a toddler learning to walk, the Lord delights when we continue to take steps toward Him.

PREPARE YOUR HOME

Depending on your fast, you may need to prepare your home. Tasty treats can make it more difficult to honor your fast. You may also want to communicate your fasting plans to the people in your home. It can be helpful to have family supporters because, sometimes, they'll pick up on your hunger pains before you do 😊. If you're fasting and have children or roommates, consider how to embrace this as an opportunity to cultivate in them a hunger for God and for the practices of Jesus. Some may have special events coming up, so anticipate modifications by looking at your calendar. For example, Spring Break may throw a wrench into some fasting plans, so consider how to plan accordingly.

PREPARE YOUR BODY

Before you fast, you may need to consult a physician, especially if you're pregnant, nursing, or have other medical issues. It's not wise to gorge yourself leading up to or when breaking a fast. It's better to avoid sugary foods. Drink plenty of water before and after your fast.

PREPARE YOUR RHYTHM

Choose a time to fast when the hunger pains can move you to reflection and prayer. This guide will provide a daily reading plan through the Gospel of Matthew, as well as personal reflection questions. Make additional space for daily prayer, especially as you fast. Plan what you'll do instead of eating. Plan what you'll do when you feel hungry. Remember, the goal isn't to increase your productivity by working through lunch but to increase your prayers and proximity to God.

Ready, Set, Go

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide has three weekly dimensions. First, there is a biblical reflection on the focus of your fasting through the week. Second, after the reflection there is a Daily Readings guide that will walk you through the Gospel of Matthew over the next 40 days. Third, this guide provides Personal Reflection Questions to help you process the aim of your week of fasting. This is the most transformative part of the guide, so don't rush through the questions. Pray and reflect on them. Write down your answers, and share them with your Oikos Group.

All right. You're all set. You may be a beginner to fasting, but you can do this! Let's go!



Week 1 Daily Readings

- February 26—Preparation
- February 27—Preparation
- February 28—Matthew 1
- March 1—Matthew 2
- March 2—Matthew 3
- March 3—Matthew 4
- March 4—Matthew 5:1-20

Personal Reflection Questions

The aim of this week of fasting is to seek the Lord's help in this 40-day journey. Seek His help in setting-up your fasting plan, revealing where you're beginning this journey, and revealing His desired destination for you. Seek to grow in self-awareness as you set-up and begin your fast.

1. Pray for the Lord to help you set-up your fasting plan. Finalize your 40-day fasting plan by February 28. Which fast will you commit to this season? What is your plan?
2. As you begin this 40-day journey, pray for the Lord to reveal where you're at spiritually. How are you and the Lord? What are the tensions and obstacles you're feeling about fasting? Every journey has a starting point, describe yours below.
3. Pray for the Lord to help you see the destination He wants for you in 40 days. Where do you want to be with the Lord? Are there areas where you need forgiveness? Healing or help? Guidance? Spiritual revival?
4. Meditate on Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18. Pray for the Lord to help you set-up a community of support but not for show. Who will you involve in your fasting plan? How?
5. On the day(s) you fast this week, take note of what the hunger pains reveal about you. What caught you by surprise? What challenges arose? When you couldn't eat, what did you want to turn to for comfort? How did you draw near to God? Describe any insights.



Week 2: Sin

Repenting of Sin

RESPONDING TO SIN

“Fasting,” Scot McKnight argues, “is the natural, inevitable response of a person to a grievous sacred moment in life.” A frequent “grievous sacred moment” is our realization of sin. In Scripture, when humble people become aware of their sin, they often respond naturally by fasting.

Our response to sin is called “repentance.” It means to turn away from or to change your direction. When we fast as a way of repenting from sin, it is a “body turning” (McKnight). By fasting in response to our sin, we embody in a physical way how we feel in our souls—humble, weak, frail, and in need of God’s grace. Our bellies help our hearts turn to God.

THE MOST COMMON FORM OF FASTING

In Scripture, repenting from sin is the most common focus of fasting. Here are a few examples:

- The Law of Moses required that Israel fast to respond to their sin each year in preparation for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-33). Fasting here was meant to be an external sign of an inner repentance. The Lord desired to make Israel “clean from all your sins”, but He wanted them to appreciate the gravity of sin, death, and atonement.
- When Samuel called Israel to repent of their idolatry, the people responded by fasting in repentance, saying, “We have sinned against the Lord” (1 Samuel 7:6).
- Jonah (finally) prophesied against the pagan city of Nineveh, announcing their imminent destruction. When they learned of their sin and its consequences, the whole city, from the greatest to the least, began to fast, and the king decreed for everyone to “turn from his evil way” (Jonah 3:1-10).
- When Nehemiah learned of his people’s trouble in the land, he “fasted for some days” and confessed the sins of his people, as well as his own household (Nehemiah 1:4-10).
- Saul of Tarsus met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he learned that he had been persecuting the Lord. His response was an absolute fast for three days (Acts 9:9).

RESPONDING TO OUR SIN

Sometimes fasting is the immediate response to a renewed awareness of sin, like with Saul of Tarsus or the city of Nineveh. When we learn of sin in our lives, or when we finally choose to turn away from it (like at baptism), fasting in confession is a natural, important practice.

Other times fasting can be a planned rhythm of reflection for sin, like with Israel on the Day of Atonement. The early church was united around the practice of fasting, particularly during the 40 days leading up to Resurrection Sunday. During this season of Lent, “all churches everywhere” practiced a time of fasting to focus on confession and repentance (McKnight).

This week our focus in fasting is to repent from sin. Seek the Lord. Search your heart. Allow your body to feel a taste of the grievous nature of your sin and its consequences. Confess and turn to the Lord.

But, remember, fasting doesn’t manipulate God to forgive you. The truth is that God is eager to make you “clean from all your sins” (Leviticus 16:30) and to turn to you “with compassion” (Jonah 3:9). Fasting is simply our natural, humble response to the discovery of sin in us.



Daily Readings

- March 5—Matthew 5:21-49
- March 6—Matthew 6
- March 7—Matthew 7
- March 8—Matthew 8
- March 9—Matthew 9
- March 10—Matthew 10
- March 11—Matthew 11

Personal Reflection Questions

The aim of this week of fasting is to explore sin and its consequences. Fasting is a response to *our* sin and the sins of *others* against us. Ask the Lord to help you see your flesh, your false self. Use this week as an opportunity to grow in holiness.

1. Meditate on Psalm 139, and pray for the Lord to reveal any sin in your life. Ask God to help you make a full list of your sins. Explore secret sin, as well as sins of omission and commission. Confess your list of sins to God and to a trusted friend or group (James 5:16).
2. Envision the Lord in your mind, holding your list of sins before him. Ask him to take your sin. Pray the words of 1 John 1:9—"Lord, I believe your word which says, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' I receive your forgiveness in Christ." Are you able to receive his grace?
3. Pray for the Lord to reveal the consequences of your sin. How did your sin impact your relationship with God? With others? With yourself? Is there anyone you need to seek forgiveness from (Luke 17:3-4)?
4. Pray for the Lord to reveal the consequences of the sins of others against you. How did the consequences of their sin alter your life? Your sense of self? Pray for the Lord to help you see if there's anyone you need to forgive (Mark 11:25).
5. On the day(s) you fast this week, take note of what the hunger pains reveal about you. What caught you by surprise? What challenges arose? When you couldn't eat, what did you want to turn to for comfort? How did you draw near to God? Describe any insights.



Week 3: Suffering

Resonating with Suffering

RESPONDING TO SUFFERING

Another common form of fasting in Scripture is the response to suffering, sickness, danger, and death. This makes intuitive sense, and yet it is counter-cultural. Intuitively, we know and have probably experienced the loss of appetite in our moments of despair. But it remains counter-cultural. In most churches, the first thing we do when we hear of someone sick or mourning a death is to set up a meal plan!

Fasting in response to suffering is natural and normal. It embodies what our hearts hunger for.

SUFFERING, SICKNESS, AND DEATH

Fasting as a response to suffering and death is all over Scripture. Here are a few examples:

- In one of the darkest parts of the God's story, the Lord led the nation of Israel to war against the tribe of Benjamin for egregious sin. Thousands were killed in battle. The whole army wept, overwhelmed by grief. "They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening" (Judges 20:24-28). The next day the Lord delivered them.
- Hannah endured infertility for many years. Worse still, her rival teased her about it constantly. In her despair, she refused to eat, as she wept and prayed to the Lord for a child (1 Samuel 1:1-20). After this the Lord gave her a child.
- When the wicked Haman set a plot in motion to exterminate the Jews, the nation responded with "great mourning," and "fasting, weeping, and lamenting" (Esther 4:3). Esther the Queen called her people to "hold a fast on my behalf" for 3 days (4:16).
- David often fasted as a sign of mourning or petition to God. When his accusers who wanted him dead became ill, he afflicted himself with fasting in prayer for them (Psalm 35:11-14). When David heard of the death of King Saul, he fasted until evening (2 Samuel 1:12; cf. 3:35). When his newborn child became ill, he fasted in an embodied plea for life (2 Samuel 12:15-19).
- The prophet Isaiah criticized the fasting practices of Israel (58:1-14). They were fasting from food while continuing to perpetuate injustice. "Is that what you call a fast?" "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice?" Their fasting was an empty ritual, but the Lord called them to fast for solidarity with and justice for the poor.

SOLIDARITY WITH GOD AND SUFFERERS

This week our focus in fasting is to resonate with suffering. Fasting is a way of resonating with the heart of God for sufferers and the heart of sufferers for God. As McKnight says, "At the very core of fasting is empathy with the divine or participation in God's perception of a sacred moment . . . Fasting is about *pathos*, taking on the emotions of God in a given event." When we fast in response to suffering, we seek to feel with God's perspective on a situation. We pray, lament, and plead, trusting that God sees what we see and is grieved too.

When we fast like this, we also seek to know and to feel our neighbor's perspective on a situation. In Scripture, fasting in prayer is done for and with others, even enemies. Fasting helps us feel what others are feeling. Fasting is meant to move us to embodied compassion, where we feel as the poor and oppressed so that we also work for justice of the poor and oppressed.

Fasting embodies and internalizes our hunger for things to be made right. It seeks healing, health, life, and justice.



Daily Readings

- March 12—Matthew 12:1-32
- March 13—Matthew 12:33-50
- March 14—Matthew 13:1-23
- March 15—Matthew 13:24-58
- March 16—Matthew 14:1-21
- March 17—Matthew 14:22-36
- March 18—Matthew 15:1-20

Personal Reflection Questions

The aim of this week of fasting is to practice solidarity with sufferers. Fasting is a response to all kinds of suffering, such as death, sickness, and poverty. Allow your fasting to move you to intercession, compassion, and justice.

1. Ask the Lord to help you notice your own pain and the suffering of those around you. Confess your inattentiveness. Who is suffering in your family? In Oikos? In your city? What about Christians around the globe? Share their suffering with God in prayer.
2. Who is the Lord seeing that you have overlooked? Allow your hunger to help you lament, grieve, and groan to the Lord. Ask God to share His heart for these sufferers. How does the Lord see sufferers? How does your heart need transformed to be like His?
3. What do these sufferers need? Intercede for healing. Ask God to help the sufferers. How can you use your fasting this week as a cue for intercession?
4. Pray for the Lord to move you deeper into solidarity with the poor. Meditate on Isaiah 58. Confess your inaction. What does the Lord want you to do?
5. On the day(s) you fast this week, take note of what the hunger pains reveal about you. What caught you by surprise? What challenges arose? When you couldn't eat, what did you want to turn to for comfort? How did you draw near to God? Describe any insights.



Week 4: Separation

Revealing God's Separation

RESPONDING TO SEPARATION

Fasting in Scripture often expresses the response to apparent separation from the Lord. When people feel His absence, long for His presence, or are in need of His guidance, they often fast as a way of seeking Him with their whole selves. Fasting is often on the front end of a fresh encounter with the Lord.

DESIRING GOD

Many of the heroes of faith express their longing for God's presence and guidance through fasting. Here are a few examples:

- Moses went up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and nights without eating or drinking. There he communed with God and received the revelation of the Law (Deuteronomy 9:9-11).
- Daniel fasted and prayed to the Lord for His presence to return to Jerusalem. At the end of his fast, the Lord gave him a heavenly vision of God's work in the world (Daniel 9-10).
- Anna, a nearly lifelong widow, hungered for the presence of God, so she devoted her life to worshipping the Lord in the temple "with fasting and prayer night and day." She was "looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38).
- While John the Baptist and his disciples fasted in anticipation of the Messiah, Jesus and his disciples did not. He said *with him* it was like a wedding celebration, and the time for fasting and mourning would be when he is "taken away from them" (Matthew 9:14-17).
- While Barnabas and Saul "were worshipping the Lord and fasting," the Holy Spirit called and sent them into the most important missionary work the world has ever seen. In response, the church fasted, prayed, and commissioned them for service (Acts 13:1-3).

REVEALING GOD

This week our focus in fasting is to seek the revealing of God. When we fast, we take the feeling of distance from Him and turn it into a felt hunger and pursuit for more of Him.

It's important to remember how this focus of Christian fasting differs from other types. We do not fast for God's presence because it clears our minds to receive revelation in a special way (though fasting does have many mental benefits). Fasting is not about the results, it's about our response. Biblically speaking, fasting embodies our longing for God. Those who long for more of God feel His distance most acutely. In response they fast and seek His face. When we seek him and knock, He opens the door to His assuring presence and guiding voice (Matthew 7:7-8).

Jesus says our fasting is not like the old wineskins of Pharisaical religion (Matthew 9:14-17). How? We fast with His presence in us, not just for His presence. We already have the kingdom in our midst, even as we wait for it in full. So, yes, fasting is a mark of grief, but we do not grieve as others who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We fast with confidence and anticipation of His presence with us now.

Thomas Ryan describes this in *The Sacred Art of Fasting*, "It's like a mother and father cleaning the house and making up the beds in anticipation of the kids' coming home at ... Christmas. It's like standing in the airport terminal or train station, waiting for your loved one to appear. It's like a fiancée patiently addressing the wedding invitations: The long-awaited event is not here yet, but it will come, and this is necessary preparation. In each case the energy is upbeat, forward-looking, and marked by the quiet joy of anticipation."



Daily Readings

- March 19—Matthew 15:21-39
- March 20—Matthew 16
- March 21—Matthew 17
- March 22—Matthew 18
- March 23—Matthew 19
- March 24—Matthew 20
- March 25—Matthew 21:1-22

Personal Reflection Questions

The aim of this week of fasting is to seek the presence and guidance of God. Fasting is a response to our need for God's direction and nearness. Allow your fasting to move you to worship and discernment.

1. Ask the Lord to help you take note of your experiences of His presence in your day-to-day life. Does God feel near or far? Do you sense His approval or rejection? Are you seeking Him often or rarely?
2. What do you think is keeping you from experiencing more of God's presence and goodness in your life? Is the problem with you? Is the problem with God? Ask the Lord to help you see. Hold these to the light of His truth and confess them to the Lord.
3. Where do you need the Lord's help discerning? What decisions or transitions are you facing? Speak these to God in prayer. Allow your fasting this week to be a cue for seeking His guiding presence and wisdom.
4. What are you anticipating and looking forward to? What are you hungering for? How can you invite the Lord into these things? Make time to pray and ask for these things.
5. On the day(s) you fast this week, take note of what the hunger pains reveal about you. What caught you by surprise? What challenges arose? When you couldn't eat, what did you want to turn to for comfort? How did you draw near to God? Describe any insights.



Week 5: Self-Reliance

Resisting Self-Reliance

RESPONDING TO SELF-RELIANCE

All of the focuses of fasting that we have explored in this journey so far can be included under the heading of “self-reliance.” In self-reliance we depend on our own strength, power, and insight. In fasting for sin, we recognize our failure of self-reliance, and plead for God’s mercy in confession. When we fast in response to suffering and death, we appeal to and rely on the one who can intervene with greater power than we can. When we fast because of separation from God, we come to the end of ourselves and long for Him.

And yet one of the most common and powerful dangers to the practice of fasting *is* self-reliance. In fasting, we are tempted to pursue new breakthroughs for ourselves by ourselves. John Piper wrote in *A Hunger for God*, “The danger of eating is that we fall in love with the gift; the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and glory in our willpower.” The apostle Paul tells the Colossians, “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.” Again, “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism...” Paul says that those who say, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” have a “self-made religion” which is “of no value.” When we move the focus of fasting from Christ to self-achievement, we lose hold of the “Head, from whom the whole body is nourished” (Colossians 2:16-23). As we focus our fasting on self-reliance, we must ensure that it doesn’t rear its ugly head in our fasting.

The goal of fasting is not simply greater self-discipline, as if it’s all about you; it is greater love for God and others, empowered by His grace.

FASTING FROM SELF-RELIANCE

Fasting as resistance to self-reliance and self-indulgence occurs often in Scripture. Here are a few examples:

- Daniel resisted the delicacies of Babylon as he took on a partial fast of water and vegetables only. He wasn’t motivated by the Law or health benefits. He said he was concerned with “defiling himself”—blending into the way of life in Babylon (Daniel 1:8-16).
- As Ezra led the exiles back to Jerusalem, he assured the king that they didn’t need his horses and soldiers to protect them. God would protect them, he said. “So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty” (Ezra 8:21-23).
- In the wilderness Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in a reversal of the indulgence of Israel in their wilderness testing. Instead of relying on himself, he relied on God’s power, saying, “Man shall not live by bread alone” (Matthew 4:1-4).
- Jesus taught us to resist the reward of being seen by others when we fast. Secret fasting is seen by the Father and is rewarded with inner transformation (Matthew 6:16-18).
- The apostle Paul sought to “discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). He said he was “often in fasting”, using the word for religious fasts, not just a lack of food (2 Corinthians 11:27).

AN APPETITE FOR GOD

This week our focus in fasting is to resist self-reliance and self-indulgence. Dallas Willard says in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, fasting “reveals to us how much our peace depends on the pleasures of eating.” By saying no to food, we remind ourselves that our god is not our belly (Philippians 3:19) and that the stomach is meant for more than appetite (1 Corinthians 6:12-13). We are growing our appetites for God and His kingdom.



Daily Readings

- March 26—Matthew 21:23-46
- March 27—Matthew 22:1-22
- March 28—Matthew 22:23-46
- March 29—Matthew 23
- March 30—Matthew 24:1-28
- March 31—Matthew 24:29-51
- April 1—Matthew 25

Personal Reflection Questions

The aim of this week of fasting is to resist self-reliance and to grow in dependence on God. Fasting is a response to our tendency to please ourselves for ourselves. Allow your fasting to move you to grow in self-discipline and love.

1. Ask the Lord to help you notice your tendencies toward self-indulgence. Which appetites do you simply satisfy without thinking? What do you turn to for pleasure or peace—sex, porn, social media, streaming, food, alcohol, marijuana, shopping, or other things?
2. Ask the Lord to help you notice what these pleasures are masking. What do you think you need that your self-indulgence attempts to satisfy? What in your life feels out of control? How do the things you turn to for peace give you a sense of control?
3. Pray for the Lord's help to see your self-reliance. Where do you find it difficult to trust God or others? Have you ever had to rely on God for His provision? Did it seem like He failed or provided? How do you currently rely on others? Is this difficult for you?
4. Self-reliance can often lead to feelings of pride in ourselves and contempt for others. Where do you see pride in yourself? Where do you look down on others? How does your self-reliance block you from a deeper relationship with God or with others?
5. On the day(s) you fast this week, take note of what the hunger pains reveal about you. What caught you by surprise? What challenges arose? When you couldn't eat, what did you want to turn to for comfort? How did you draw near to God? Describe any insights.



Week 6: Salvation

Remembering Our Salvation

RESPONDING TO SALVATION

It may seem odd to fast as we remember our salvation. Shouldn't we be feasting and celebrating? Well, yes. In fact, the early church disallowed fasting on the Lord's Day (Sunday). The Sabbath (Saturday) was also off limits for most Christians. Except, that is, on the Saturday after Good Friday. That's because nearly all Christians everywhere practiced a 40 day fast leading up to Resurrection Sunday. To most early Christians, fasting to remember the events of their salvation wasn't odd at all. It was expected. As they remembered their salvation and the suffering of the Messiah, it moved them to respond in fasting. They used this time of fasting for introspection and reflection.

There is a tension here when we fast. As we explored some in week 4, Jesus said that a new wineskin has come, and our fasting should reflect this new reality (Matthew 9:14-17). For Christians, we fast as people who are forgiven, hopeful, Spirit-filled, with Christ, the hope of glory being formed in us (Colossians 1:27). We fast as people saved and sealed for eternity (Ephesians 1:13-14). The accuser has been silenced, death has been defeated, the Spirit is here in us!

And yet we do fast. We continue to weep and to mourn. Though Jesus has *already* come, we, like the disciples of John the Baptist, wait on the return of the Bridegroom, Jesus (Matthew 25:1-13). We wait in hope. We hope for our full transformation into his image. We hope for his coming and the renewal of all things. We hope for God to be all in all. This longing leads to our fasting.

FASTING OR FEASTING?

In Scripture, God shared rhythms of fasting for His people to remember His mighty deeds. These were often a mix of mourning and hope. Here are a few examples:

- On the Day of Atonement the people of Israel mourned their sin in anticipation of atonement through the offerings of the priest and the mercy of God (Leviticus 16).
- God's deliverance in the days of Esther and Mordecai led to the feast of Purim. The days of fasting and mourning by the people are now remembered and celebrated (Esther 9:31).
- Several days of fasting were practiced by God's people after the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. Zechariah called these "the fast of the fourth," "fifth," "seventh," and "tenth month." He prophesied that these fasts remembering heartache would one day be "seasons of joy and gladness" (Zechariah 8:19).

After the writings of the New Testament, many early Christians began to fast at set rhythms.

- The Didache urged regular fasting twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays.
- Many early Christians fasted in preparation before the Bread and the Cup at the Table.
- Though the details often shifted from place to place, the early church was united around a 40-day fast during Lent for reflection on the sufferings of Jesus.

REMEMBERING THE GOSPEL

In this final week of the journey, we turn our attention to the salvation brought to us in the gospel of King Jesus. This week our Daily Readings move us through Holy Week, the final week before Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Our fasting focuses on remembering and sharing in what he has done for us.

As we remember, we mourn, celebrate, and praise God our Savior, Jesus Christ.



Daily Readings

- April 2—Matthew 26:1-25
- April 3—Matthew 26:26-46
- April 4—Matthew 26:47-75
- April 5—Matthew 27:1-23
- April 6—Matthew 27:24-44
- April 7—Matthew 27:45-66
- April 8—Matthew 28

Personal Reflection Questions

The aim of this week of fasting is to remember the saving events of the gospel of King Jesus. Fasting is a response to the suffering of the Son of God for us. Allow your fasting to move you to gratitude and introspection. Consider making time each day to reflect during Holy Week.

1. Ask the Lord to open your heart to seeing our need for salvation. Why did Jesus need to die for us? Why did Jesus need to die for you?
2. Ask the Lord to see the cost of salvation. What did it cost the Lord to redeem the world from sin and death? What did Jesus the Son give for our salvation? What did he endure that you might have life?
3. Ask the Lord to open your heart to seeing God's desire for our salvation. Why would God bear the price of our redemption by sending His one and only Son? Why would He rescue you? What does this mean about God's face towards you?
4. Meditate on Jesus our mediator. What makes him qualified to be our go-between to the Father? What kind of nearness does he grant you? What kind of compassion and understanding does he have for you? How does that shape your perspective on prayer?
5. On the day(s) you fast this week, take note of what the hunger pains reveal about you. What caught you by surprise? What challenges arose? When you couldn't eat, what did you want to turn to for comfort? How did you draw near to God? Describe any insights.



Daily Bible Readings

Day 1	2/28	Matthew 1
Day 2	3/1	Matthew 2
Day 3	3/2	Matthew 3
Day 4	3/3	Matthew 4
Day 5	3/4	Matthew 5:1-20
Day 6	3/5	Matthew 5:21-49
Day 7	3/6	Matthew 6
Day 8	3/7	Matthew 7
Day 9	3/8	Matthew 8
Day 10	3/9	Matthew 9
Day 11	3/10	Matthew 10
Day 12	3/11	Matthew 11
Day 13	3/12	Matthew 12:1-32
Day 14	3/13	Matthew 12:33-50
Day 15	3/14	Matthew 13:1-23
Day 16	3/15	Matthew 13:24-58
Day 17	3/16	Matthew 14:1-21
Day 18	3/17	Matthew 14:22-36
Day 19	3/18	Matthew 15:1-20
Day 20	3/19	Matthew 15:21-39
Day 21	3/20	Matthew 16
Day 22	3/21	Matthew 17
Day 23	3/22	Matthew 18
Day 24	3/23	Matthew 19
Day 25	3/24	Matthew 20
Day 26	3/25	Matthew 21:1-22
Day 27	3/26	Matthew 21:23-46
Day 28	3/27	Matthew 22:1-22
Day 29	3/28	Matthew 22:23-46
Day 30	3/29	Matthew 23
Day 31	3/30	Matthew 24:1-28
Day 32	3/31	Matthew 24:29-51
Day 33	4/1	Matthew 25
Day 34	4/2	Matthew 26:1-25
Day 35	4/3	Matthew 26:26-46
Day 36	4/4	Matthew 26:47-75
Day 37	4/5	Matthew 27:1-23
Day 38	4/6	Matthew 27:24-44
Day 39	4/7	Matthew 27:45-66
Day 40	4/8	Matthew 28



Moving Forward with Fasting

Thank you for taking this journey of prayer and fasting with us.

Our 40-day journey ends at Easter. Here we move from fasting into feasting. Resurrection Sunday is a time to turn from lament into celebration before God and His people.

Life is filled with these transitions from fasting into feasting. Our hope is that your capacity to respond to the fullness of life in whole-hearted, honest ways has expanded during this journey. Instead of simply putting on a good face during the hard stuff of life, now you have the language of fasting to communicate to God and yourself with your body. Fasting allows us to step authentically into sadness, grief, and lament. So, the next time you're struck with a "sacred moment," don't rush through it. Lean in to the feeling through fasting and prayer.

This world is overwhelmed with hard stuff, so we must also allow God to feed us with the goodness of food and abundance. After all, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking" (Matthew 11:19). Remember the grace of God each day. His mercies truly are "new every morning" (Lamentations 3:22-23). If Lent is a season of fasting, let Easter be a season of feasting. Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again.

"So, whether you eat or drink...do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

But fasting doesn't have to wait until next year or the next "sacred moment." Many disciples of Jesus have adopted fasting and feasting as a regular part of their rhythm of life. They had an *annual* rhythm where they moved through the seasons of the year with an eye toward the life of Jesus Christ and the gospel story. The fasting of Lent prepared them for the feasts of Easter; the fasting of Advent prepared them for the feasts of Christmas.

Early believers also had *weekly* rhythms of prayer and fasting. From the first century on, Christians fasted during the day twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays. They used this weekly cycle to reflect on Christ and his sufferings for sin. On Saturdays and Sundays, many moved into Sabbath rest, worship, and feasting with the Lord and His people.

Perhaps you would like to do the same. Fasting *and* feasting, for God's glory. May our tables be moments where we "taste and see the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). May our hunger for food be turned into a deeper hunger for God.

God bless,
Smith

