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Beginner's Guide to Fasting

Elmer L. Towns

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Beginner's Guide to

Fasting

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BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO FASTING

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Elmer L. Towns
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BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO FASTING
BY
ELMER TOWNS

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INTRODUCTION

I was converted at age 17 and did not fast until I was 39 years old. During those years I read the Bible through each year—including the passages on fasting—but never once thought fasting was for me. I considered fasting an Old Testament “thing,” and I didn’t feel the least bit guilty about not fasting until I moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, and met Jerry Falwell.

Jerry Falwell had led his church to fast and we began fasting as we began Liberty University (I am called a co-founder, but Falwell was the driving force that established the University). In Lynchburg I found myself paying two monthly house payments, one in Virginia, and another back in Greater Chicago, because I couldn’t sell my previous house before moving. Two monthly payments put an enormous strain on the family budget.

I observed when Jerry Falwell needed money for a new University building or a television project; he asked people to fast and pray with him for money, and it always came in.

I asked my wife to fast and pray with me on the 15th day of the month because that was the date the Chicago payment was due. We fasted and prayed that month but the house didn’t sell. I forgot about fasting until the 15th day of the following month then fasted and prayed again for it to sell. But again, it didn’t sell.

After fasting and praying the third month, the realtor phoned to say there was finally a nibble. In a down real estate market, only one person had looked at my house, but he returned several times to check out details. We finally closed the sale almost one year after we first fasted. At the closing, the buyer told me he began looking at my house on his wife’s birthday, the day after Ruth and I fasted the first time. I learned two things from that experience; first, fasting takes prayer to a higher level of fulfillment, and second, don’t quit too soon.

That experience taught us that fasting was an invaluable foundation to prayer. Of course, not everything happened that we fasted about, but it added a new dimension to our prayer lives. Since that time, we have learned that fasting is an invaluable way to get to know God.

I challenge you to read this simple book, then follow its suggestion (unless you have a medical reason not to fast.) When you take your first fast, you are beginning a spiritual journey that will change your life. Not only are you more likely to get your prayers answered, you will draw closer to God than ever before.

Many people have taught me much about fasting, I give them credit for all the wisdom they have given me. For all the weaknesses in this book, I take responsibility. May God teach us all to “hunger and thirst after righteousness” so we might know God better.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Elmer L. Towns

Written in my home
At the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia
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SECTION ONE

THE PRACTICE OF FASTING

- Chapter 1 Getting Ready**
- Chapter 2 My First Fast**
- Chapter 3 What Kind of Fast To Follow**
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CHAPTER 1

Getting Ready

God created the human body as a finely tuned physical engine of enormous power, but it requires fuel to keep operating. That fuel is called food. To make sure the body gets fuel, God has created within each of us an appetite for food, it's called hunger. As part of the balance of nature to keep life going, God has created food that satisfies our appetite and gives us strength.

So why would you choose to go without food?

Americans have programmed themselves to eat three times a day. We constantly hear, "A good breakfast is the foundation of the day." Our mothers told us, "Eat so you'll be strong." In school we were taught to eat "3 square meals a day . . . exercise to be strong . . . come in out of the rain so you won't catch a cold . . . we were taught to take care of our bodies."

So why should you go without eating?

Starvation is still a world-wide threat. In 1978 I was part of a massive feeding program in Haiti because that nation had a famine, compounded by their poverty. The swollen bellies of hungry little children distressed me. Starving people stampeded our vehicles for food, trampling the fallen children just to get a loaf of bread. With much of the world clamoring for food,

"Why would you go without eating?"

The world calls it *dieting* to lose weight, or *abstinence* for health reasons, but the Bible calls it fasting. You fast for spiritual reasons. Usually a fast is for a pre-determined length of time to accomplish a spiritual purpose. When you can't get an answer to prayer, even though you have prayed continually—yet no answer—try fasting and prayer. When you pray and go without food, your fasting demonstrates your sincerity to God, "If you believe with all your heart

...” (Acts 8:37). When you give up that which is enjoyable and necessary, you get the attention of God.

Only once a year were the Jewish believers in the Old Testament required to fast, “In the seventh month, on the tenth day, you shall go without eating” (Leviticus 16:29 CEV). Because this fast was kept on the Day of Atonement, it is called the Yom Kippur Fast (i.e., the phrase means Day of Atonement). There were seven other days in the Jewish calendar where believers were commanded to eat a “feast” because God realized there was great spiritual benefit in fellowship when believers eat together. Notice, only *one* day to fast, but *seven* days to feast. Therefore, don’t become obsessive with not eating. There is nothing wrong with eating, as a matter of fact, eating is enjoyable and God wanted His people to enjoy their religious days by eating. so today church suppers have their place.

But once each year on the Day of Atonement, God required his people to fast—everyone went without eating. Why everyone? Because God wanted everyone to remember the solemn experience of their salvation. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest took the blood of an animal into the Holy of Holies to offer it in substitution for the sins of everyone, “And he shall wash his body with water in a holy place, put on his garments, come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people” (Leviticus 16:24). Because the Day of Atonement dealt with the sins of the nation, everyone fasted to identify with the High Priest who sacrificed a lamb for the forgiveness of their sin.

But today, Christians are not required to fast, they are not under law, but under grace. We no longer have to sacrifice the blood of a lamb for forgiveness. Jesus is the lamb of God who died for all (John 1:29). In the Old Testament Jewish believers fasted to demonstrate their

obedience to God. However, in the New Testament dispensation of grace, things are different. We are not *required* to fast, but we are *allowed* to fast for certain reasons. Jesus told His disciples, “When you fast . . .” (Matthew 6:16), because fasting is a discipline to build our character and faith. Even then, Jesus told us not to show off our fast, “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting” (Matthew 6:16). Jesus went on to explain what our attitude ought to be when we fast, “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place” (Matthew 6:17,18).

* * * * *

If you have never fasted, it probably is a scary thing to think about going without food because we are programmed to eat three times a day. Because of that, many wonder if they will get hungry, and if the hunger pains will hurt.

Fasting to God will not hurt any more than dieting to get thinner. If people can cut back in their eating just to lose weight, can you cut back on food to seek God’s presence and get an answer to your prayers? Also, the diabetic has to stop eating sweets, those with diverticulosis stop eating nuts and popcorn, and those with high blood pressure stop eating highly salty foods. They stop eating certain things to stay healthy, can you fast to become more spiritual?

But other people have different questions. “Can I hold out?” They don’t want to get started on a journey they can’t complete. They see a commercial on television that suggests a candy bar will help them get through the afternoon. Yes, chocolates and sugar will give you an afternoon “zap,” but snacks are not always necessary. The ability to stay on your fast is not

measured by how hard you try to stay away from food, but by the positive attraction of knowing God and spending time with Him.

Before I was converted, I was very religious, attending church every week. But I cursed all the time. I tried several “religious” things over the years, to quit cursing but each time I slipped and began cursing again. The harder I tried, the more addictive the habit. When I received Christ as my Savior, I instantly quit cursing—without trying and without religious tricks—Jesus made the difference. I no longer had any desire to curse, as a matter of fact, I abandoned cursing. The same way with fasting, if you try “tricks” to keep from eating; there’s a good chance you’ll fail. But when you realize you’ll spend quality time with Jesus while you are fasting, He will help you keep your fast, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

There’s another question people have about fasting, “Will I harm myself?” Because we’ve become so conditioned to eating three meals a day, we think we will harm ourselves when we miss those three meals. We think our bodies are like our cars, if they don’t put oil in the engine, it’ll burn up. Some think they’ll get sick if they fast. And when they think of a three-day fast, they are absolutely sure they will die . But statistics have demonstrated that fasting is actually good for the body. During a fast you eliminate poisons and toxins from your body. Just as God created the Sabbath, so our bodies would rest one day out of seven, so the fast gives our digestive tract an opportunity to rest. But it is not just resting our bodies when we don’t eat; we allow the body to cleanse itself of toxins and built-up poisons.

Still others are concerned about what their friends will think if they fast. “Will my friends think I’m weird when they learn I am fasting?” The answer is simple: you don’t fast to impress your friends, and on most occasions, you don’t even let them know. Jesus said, “when

you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 6:17-18).

Jesus was reminding us not to make an outward show of our religious dedication to God. Rather, fasting is a private commitment between you and God. Sometimes you fast privately and not tell anyone. At other times, you will enter a public fast, such as with your church or with another individual (Ezra fasted with 4,000 people to solve a problem, and Esther asked for all Jewish believers to fast for divine intervention. Christians are asked to join the National Day of Prayer and Fasting in May each year). So don't worry what others think when you don't eat with them. There have been many occasions when you go on a coffee break with friends, but just drink some water because you don't feel well. Sometimes you order just coffee because you have already eaten, or you order a 7-up because your stomach is upset. Be focused on your fast and don't pay attention to what is said. Just go ahead with your fast to God, and keep your actions private.

Fasting is not the same thing as dieting. When you're trying to lose weight, it's agony to stop eating the things you want to eat. Dieting is really hard because you like to eat, but in contrast, fasting is wonderfully easy because you want to go without eating, so you can seek God's presence.

Fasting is not the same thing as eliminating food for health. Perhaps a doctor talks to you after a heart attack to eliminate red meat and desserts. Some eliminate dangerous things from their diet out of fear of getting sick, but fasting is different. You are never anxious about fasting because you hunger and thirst after God's presence in your life.

WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is a non-required discipline (you don't have to do it) where you alter your diet (there are many kinds of fasts) for a spiritual reason (there are many reasons to fast) to accompany the experience with prayer.

Fasting is not required of Christians, this means you don't have to do it. As a matter of fact, some who have never fasted may be more spiritual than some who do fast. There are some grandmothers who are effective intercessors, but they have never fasted once. Why? Because they continually live so close to God, that they don't have to fast to get closer to God.

Take the illustration of a man who goes to the gym to exercise to keep in shape physically. He can keep in shape whether he uses barbells, a rowing machine, a skiing machine or he jogs daily. Each form of exercise is a discipline that keeps him in good physical condition. But there is another man who keeps in great shape but never goes to the gym, and never jogs. He's a roofer who keeps in shape by constantly throwing around house shingles. Fasting is a biblical discipline that will get you in spiritual shape to become a prayer warrior for God. But there are others—like the grandmother—who doesn't need the external discipline of fasting to be a prayer warrior. They just live with God daily and that keeps them spiritually fit.

Expect resistance when you plan to fast. Our spiritual enemy will not give up easily. When you repent or discipline certain areas of your life, the Devil will not easily give up any territory he has conquered. If you pray for others . . . for your church . . . for the salvation of people . . . Satan will oppose you. So I'm not asking you to fast because it is easy. When you fast to get the Holy Spirit involved in your life, the enemy will not easily give up ground that he has won.

Like climbing a mountain, fasting is physically challenging. Fasting will be difficult . . . draining . . . and dangerous. So embark on this adventure with full knowledge that the path ahead will be tough. But the reward will be worth it.

PRINCIPLES I LEARNED ABOUT GETTING READY

- I learned the one day Yom Kippur Fast is best for my first fast.
- I should not be fearful about fasting because many have gone without food for one day.
- I am not required to fast, but will do so as a spiritual discipline.
- I will not worry what others think about my fast because it is a personal commitment between God and me.
- I will expect spiritual resistance to my fast because the Evil One does not want me to get closer to God.

JOURNALING

As you ponder a decision whether or not you should fast, write your thoughts in a journal. You will find that expressing yourself in writing will help you think clearer. Use the following questions to guide your decision-making process, then write your answers in your journal.

1. Do you have a clear reason to fast? What is it? (This is usually called a *cause*.)
2. List some reasons why you should not fast, also some times when you shouldn't fast.
3. Make a list of the difficulties you think you'll encounter in your fast. Why are they problems to you?
4. Do you think you can overcome them? How?

THREE-STEP BIBLE STUDY

This Bible study is laid out in three easy steps to lead you in your study of God’s Word. FIRST, you will read a question to focus your attention on the topic. The question is to make you think. SECOND, there will be a Bible verse for you to read and analyze. Use the questions to focus your thinking. THIRD, there will be space for you to write out your response to the questions. Even when you think the answer is simple, writing it out makes you think exactly.

1. God required all Israelites to fast, but this is not a present day requirement of the church. What lessons can Israel’s fasting have for you?

"On the tenth day of the seventh month of each year, you must go without eating"- Lev. 16:29 CEV

2. What can we learn from Jesus about fasting? How will this verse influence your fasting?

"But you, when you fastest, anoint your head, and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" – Matthew 6:17-18

3. When prayer is not enough, we can add fasting to our intercession. How do you think fasting will help your prayer life?

“However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” – Matthew 17:21

4. We must fast with outward repentance as well as with inward sincerity. How have you prepared for your first fast?

“Now, therefore,’ says the LORD, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning’” - Joel 2:12

5. What will God do for you when you fast?

“So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will return and relent, and leave a blessing behind him” - Joel 2:13-14

6. What should be the prayer of your heart about unknown sin as you begin a fast?

" Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” - Psalm 139:23-24

7. What will it take to seek and find God? What do you have to do to find Him?

"And you will seek Me, and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" - Jer. 29:13

8. What is your usual response to bad news? What can fasting do when we get bad news?

"So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven" - Neh. 1:4
