

- Fasting

Fasting (abstaining from food and all that invigorates the body to humble oneself and devote oneself undividedly to God) commonly accompanies prayer and worship in both OT and NT (Ezra 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3; etc.).

The purpose of fasting is to

- humble oneself before God (Ezra 8:21; Ps. 35:13), hence it common association with repentance and the confession of one's sins to God (1 Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:1-3; Dan. 9:3ff.; Joel 2:12);
- to seek God and ask his help in an especially focused way (2 Chron. 20:3-4; cf. Acts 10:30-31 [v.l.]; 13:2-3; 14:23), having put aside things that compete with God for our time and attention (Zech. 7:5-6);
- to pray for others' needs, especially when others are in danger, e.g. due to serious illness, persecution, etc. (Ps. 35:13; Esther 4:16);
- to be strengthened by God so that one can oppose the powers of evil (Mt. 17:21[v.l.])

Fasting must be

- done privately, so that it is known to God alone (Mt. 6:16-18);
- be accompanied by the reading of Scripture (Neh. 9:1-3; Jer. 36:6,10) and worship (Neh. 9:1-3 [note esp. v. 3])
- be offered only when one's own unkind and unjust treatment of others has been addressed, seen for the evil it is, and repented of (Is. 58:3-7 [note that in vv. 6-7 repentance leads to making restitution appropriate for a specific past wrong]; cf. Jesus' teaching on prayer in Mt. 5:23-24 [note that repentance leads to apology and reconciliation])

- Vigils (Night Watches)

- Fasting from sleep by staying up part of the night when one would ordinarily be sleeping to devote oneself to prayer and intercession.
 - ♣ See Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, v. 4, pp. 15-16, citing Lk. 6:12; Mt. 26:36,40-41,43-45 (staying up late into the night) and Mk. 1:35 (rising in the early morning well before dawn).

Fasting is not a technique or a source of power that we can use to manipulate outcomes or future events (horizontal axis of managing everyday life).

Fasting is about looking to God and spending time with God (vertical axis of looking to God as the source and goal of one's life).

Fasting only has a place when a regular pattern of personal prayer has been established.

To fast when a regular pattern of personal prayer has not been established is a mistake and will either lead to

- (1) taking on too much before one is ready and thus feeling overburdened and discouraged ("I can't do this") or

- (2) achieving something novel that is quite different from one's ordinary pattern of life ("Look what I achieved!"), which will lead to pride and hypocrisy.

If one has a regular pattern of personal prayer and wants to begin fasting, start with a half-day fast.

- Devote at least 45 minutes in the morning to undivided, undistracted time with God.
- Try to keep God in mind during the rest of the morning and early afternoon, while you are doing simple physical tasks that do not require your undivided attention.
- Make allowances in your schedule for the fact that you will have less energy during the middle of the day.
- Break your fast at 2:00-3:00 pm.

Do not increase your pattern of fasting quickly or in more significant ways without discussing this with a pastor or spiritual director.

- Our tendency is often to get ahead of ourselves. This can actually make us more likely to
 - fail to discern temptation and
 - give in to temptationbecause we have unwisely overextended ourselves and overstrained our physical bodies.

Fasting is not a universal solution for all problems in the Christian life

All people are different.

They have

- different problems (e.g., each has a different major fault, which holds them down the way an anchor holds a boat always in the same place);
- different places where sin enters into and influences their motivation and intent;
- different experiences and may be in a different stage of life, etc.

One should therefore not try to claim that fasting (or some other spiritual discipline) is the solution for every problem.

The most one can say is this:

At the appropriate time fasting can be especially helpful for people who (without seeing it) have placed their trust in the resources presently available to them.

- "Having these things makes me feel better."
 - "I feel stressed and fearful when I think I might lose hold of these things."
- "Having these things shows that I have arrived and I am the sort of person others should respect."
 - "Now I am in a position to advise and counsel others about God, the spiritual life, the running of the local church, etc."

In these cases, the problem lies in a wrong basic assumption ("if I have this, I will be well") and, following from this, wrong beliefs about value, power and authority.

Left untreated, this sickness will lead to further sins (one will sin to have or keep what they think they need).

Fasting redirects one to God, who is the only one who merits our trust and attention.