



Fasting

discipline...purpose...blessing

“Fasting brings urgency and importance to our praying. It gives force to our pleading in the court of heaven. The person who prays while fasting is giving heaven notice that they are truly sincere in a divinely appointed way. They are using a means that God has chosen to make their voice heard on high.”

-Arthur Wallis

Jesus never ran a homeless shelter. He never picketed for new legislation. He didn't start study groups on end time events. But he prayed all night on the mountain & fasted for 40 days. How are we imitating Christ with our lives?

Fasting: An Introduction to this Series

A series written by Ann Turner & Annette Jackson (12th grade LG Leaders)

In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches, an assortment of Pizza Temples, and Burrito Havens, fasting seems out of place. Each year, our nation spends over \$110 billion on fast food, \$33 billion on weight loss products, and throws away 37.5 billion pounds of food. As Americans, we are used to having more than we could ever want, not choosing to go without what we need. So how can fasting possibly be relevant or even realistic?

Well, the answer is found in God's Word. Fasting is a hot topic for God in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, it is mentioned more times than even something as important as baptism (about 77 times for fasting to 75 for baptism). Biblical heroes such as Moses, David, Elijah, Queen Esther, and the Apostle Paul all fasted, and God repetitively called the nation of Israel to fast for various reasons (2 Chron. 20:3; Is. 58; Joel 1:14). Jesus started teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount. In that teaching Jesus does not say, "IF you fast," neither does he say, "You MUST fast." His word is, very simply, "WHEN you fast." Jesus makes the assumption that people WILL fast and simply gives instruction on how to do it properly.

(It is interesting to note that Jesus also taught about giving and praying within the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "When you pray..." (Matthew 6:2-3) and "When you give..." (Matthew 6:2-3). No one doubts that we should give and pray. However, there is so little talk about "fasting" within the church and unfortunately, even a smaller amount of people who practice this spiritual discipline.)

The Bible only refers to fasting in terms of its primary sense, which is abstinence from food. However, throughout these three weeks of studying fasting, we will be discussing how fasting could look in the life of a teenager which will involve fasting from food as well as fasting from things that reach areas in their life beyond food.

The series is broken into three parts; DISCIPLINE – where we'll look at an example from the Old Testament in which Moses fasted; PURPOSE – where we'll dig into Scripture to discover the Biblical reasons for fasting; and BLESSING – where we'll tackle what fasting could look like in the life of a student.

Bottom Line: We want the students to understand fasting is not just an ancient discipline, but a spiritual discipline (a gift from the Lord!) they can engage in today that brings freedom. Enjoy how will use you and encounter you over the next three weeks!

Fasting: “Discipline”

Ann Turner’s Blog (some thoughts to help you lead this conversation with your students)

I grew up Catholic. I went to Catholic school, attended mass on Sunday’s, and experienced all the Catholic traditions such as saying the Rosary, being baptized as a baby, and giving up something each year for Lent. Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Catholic Church as a preparatory time for Easter, and it is a huge part of the Catholic faith. During the 40 days before Easter, Catholics choose to give up certain things in order to remember and imitate Jesus’ withdrawal into the wilderness for 40 days. In the traditional doctrine, lent was a time of repentance, a turning away from sin and back to God, which required some form of penance. For Catholics, this penance “required by divine law” during Lent means abstaining from meat on Fridays and choosing to give up something in order to remain mindful of God. Every year, for my entire childhood, I would “give up” candy during Lent. For 40 days and nights my love affair with sugar came to a screeching halt.

The first few days were always so difficult that I never thought I’d be able to do it. But after the 2nd week, it became more of a routine. Even though I still had moments when I wanted to sneak a bite of a Hersey’s bar, I began to see the way fasting from candy made me mindful of my relationship with God. When I remained disciplined and faithful to my commitment to fast, I felt a sense of accomplishment from abstaining from chocolate and sugar for the sake of Christ. Christ’s resurrection and my Easter basket had a “sweeter” relevance because of the fasting and sacrifice I had made.

Giving something up is never easy. However, it is a discipline required of everyone who follows Christ. Jesus said that in order to follow him we must deny ourselves (Mt. 16:24), but God also promises that we will experience awesome things when we endure it (Heb. 12:11). I have experienced this in my own life as the history I have had with fasting has helped sculpt my relationship with God and attitude as a fully devoted follower of Christ.

The idea of denying ourselves through the discipline of fasting is probably very foreign to most of our students. However, if our goal is to pour into students as they journey towards becoming more fully devoted followers of Christ, then the spiritual discipline of fasting is an opportunity we cannot skip studying.

This week we will focus on the discipline of fasting by taking a look in the Old Testament. We will read portions of Exodus chapters 31–34 which recall the events that led Moses into a supernatural fast of 40 days without food. Even though self-denial is not something that society acknowledges as admirable, it is my prayer that our students will be blessed as they look into the life of a great man who denied himself and, by doing so, had an incredible encounter with God!

GOAL: (everyone's will be a little different, write yours here to remind you of what you are leading your group toward)

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus said that in order to follow him we must deny ourselves. Tonight we're going to look at the Spiritual Discipline of Fasting and study the story of a man, Moses, who denied himself through fasting and by doing so had an incredible encounter with God!

PRAYER:

God, we all have different thoughts about the idea of fasting. Tonight help us to learn from the story of Moses. He chose to fast and he was blessed. Amen.

MEDIA/ACTIVITY/INTERACTION:

Have the student's pair off and share with one another the answers to the following questions:

1. Which would be the hardest meal to skip during the day?
2. What is the longest you've had to go without eating? What was it like?

Then have each pair share their answers with the group.

As a group, answer the following questions:

What things do you know about fasting?

Do you know anyone that fasts on a regular basis?

TRANSITION: Fasting is not something we talk about a lot, but it's mentioned a lot in the Bible. In fact, it's mentioned in the Bible more times than baptism. Tonight we're going to read about Moses and what caused him to fast and what happened when he did.

SCRIPTURE:

Assign the following bolded Scripture verses to pairs of students. Have them read through the verses on their own and then answer the questions listed next to each verse 1st in their pairs and 2nd to the group.

Finally, have your group work through the Group Questions.

Exodus 31:18 *What does Moses receive?*

Exodus 32:1 *How do the Israelites feel about waiting for Moses? What do they ask for?*

Exodus 32:15-16 *What does Moses carry down from the mountain? What's special about this item?*

Exodus 32:19-25 *What does Moses see? How does he feel about what he sees? What does he make the people do?*

Aaron is defensive towards Moses, what excuse does he give to Moses about what happened?

Exodus 33:12-21; *Who is Moses having a conversation with? What about this person can he NOT look at and why?*

Exodus 34:1-7 *What does Moses make? Who helps him with this project? What do we learn about God in these verses?*

Exodus 34:27-28 *What did Moses NOT do and for how long did he NOT do it?*

Group Questions:

1. Why do we think Moses chose to fast while he received the 10 commandments? Did Moses fast the 1st time he received the commandments? Do we think that it made a difference the 2nd time? Check out Exodus 35:29 ☺
2. What did Moses sacrifice? Would you consider this an example of "denying himself"?

TAKE AWAY:

Fasting is about denying self. Are there any areas of our lives where we're willing to put God first and us second? Moses did that for 40 days what are we willing to do?

CLOSING PRAYER:

God you care about each one of us equally and passionately. Help me to make wise choices this week and please help me to consider putting you before myself in those choices! Amen

Fasting: “Purpose”

Ann Turner’s Blog (some thoughts to help you lead this conversation with your students)

When I was asked to help with curriculum on fasting, I had mixed emotions. Growing up, my dad was probably the biggest "Foodie" alive. My childhood was something like my BIG FAT GREEK wedding when it came to food. My mom and my grandma's were all great cooks, and they made everything in huge quantities. My family would typically overeat, take a nap, wake up and eat again. Food was love, entertainment, addicting, delicious and fun. Food was a large part of our day, and writing this curriculum series has caused me to wonder: What if God took food out of the equation? What if our bodies didn't require food? What would that look like? First off, mom’s would have a lot more time on their hands! But there would also be no farming, no restaurants, no Caribou, no french fries, no grocery stores, no dining room or kitchens in your homes, no family dinners, no world hunger.

God did not have to create us with a need to eat, but He did. Thus, we know eating is a gift from God and it is good to enjoy it and take pleasure in it. However, like everything God blesses us with, we need to find balance with food. In high school, I found out that my eating habits far exceeded my body's need for nourishment. I started to realize how food monopolized my thoughts, my time and my checkbook. Food was an idol and to this day, I still fight to keep food in perspective. I love to cook and I love to eat, but I understand that God wants me to be a "Mary" and not a "Martha". We busy ourselves with so many things and miss the mark with what God really wants us to do with our time.

Fasting from food would have been very difficult for me when I was a teenager. Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience for anyone. Fasting is all about purpose...and that's what we'll be talking about in this study. I want to start off by reminding you of two things that the Bible does NOT support as Biblical motives for fasting:

- #1. Fasting is not meant to be a spiritual “weight loss program”. In Scripture, fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes, for a specific (typically short) period of time. It is distinct from dieting which stresses an abstinence from food for physical, not spiritual, purposes.
- #2. Fasting is not meant to be a way to impress God and earn God’s favor. Fasting has no eternal benefit for us until we have come to God through repentance and faith. We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Jesus Christ, not our work.

The primary purpose of Biblical fasting is to be centered on God. This means that we fast in order to know Him more, regardless of what we “receive” from fasting. Once the primary purpose of fasting is firmly fixed in our hearts, we are at liberty to understand that there are also secondary purposes in fasting. Sometimes people fast to help them make a decision – they want to hear God’s direction, and they fast in order to eliminate distractions. Other times people fast to help others, grow closer to God, or heal from a hurt of some sort.

Tonight, your students will have an opportunity to dig into Scripture to discover what the Bible has to say about the “Top 10 Biblical purposes for fasting”. This study is critical in laying the foundation for next week's study in which students will be able to explore the idea of what fasting could look like in their own lives. The students will have the opportunity to dig into A LOT of Scripture tonight. It's important that you are prepared so that you can best help them interact with the Scripture they are reading. There are leader notes provided at the end of this week's study, and I pray you see the added prep work as an opportunity to spend time with the Lord to let Him speak to you. He wants to. He loves you. Thank you for doing all you do!

GOAL: (everyone's will be a little different, write yours here to remind you of what you are leading your group toward)

INTRODUCTION: Tonight we will be digging into Scripture to discover what the Bible has to say about the "Top 10 Biblical purposes for fasting".

PRAYER: Dear God, it's obvious that Fasting is a Spiritual Discipline that You consider to be important. Help us to learn what Your word says about fasting as we study it tonight. Amen.

MEDIA/ACTIVITY/INTERACTION:

As a group come up with a top 10 list. The list could be about anything, but here are some suggestions:

Top Ten...

Favorite things about our group

Reasons to go to Homecoming

Things to NOT do on a first date

Names for a pet fish

Football players in the NFL

You get the idea.

Record the top 10 and email your list to Sara Norton.

TRANSITION: We've spent time tonight coming up with our own Top 10. Now we're going to look at what the Bible says about 10 purposes for Biblical Fasting.

SCRIPTURE:

You can get through this list as a group or assign verses to pairs. Some of the numbers have longer readings so perhaps you can give those to students more up for the challenge.

Have students try and figure out the purpose for Fasting found in each verse.

"Answers" and extra notes can be found on next page.

1. Ezra 8:22-23
2. Acts 14:23
3. I Samuel 31:3-13
4. Esther chapters 3-7
5. Joel 2:12
6. I Kings 21:25-27
7. Nehemiah 1:3-4
8. Isaiah 58:6-7
9. Matthew 4:1-11
10. Luke 2:36-37

TAKE AWAY: Before tonight, could you have come up with a list of 10 Biblical purposes for Fasting? How do you think God views fasting?

CLOSING PRAYER: Lord, please prepare our hearts for next week's study where we'll talk about how we can live this spiritual discipline out in our own lives. Amen.

Leader Notes

10 Biblical Purposes for Fasting.

These are the answers and extra information for the “Scripture” Box.

1. To strengthen Prayer - Fasting does not change God’s hearing so much as it changes our praying. Ezra 8:22-23
2. To seek God’s Guidance – More clearly discerning the will of God. Fasting does not guarantee that you will receive a clear direction from God. However, it does make us more receptive to listening to Him. Acts 14:23.
3. To express grief – Three of the first four references to fasting in the Bible connect it with an expression of grief. Whether it’s grief over a significant loss in our life or deep sadness over the sin in our life. I Samuel 31:3-13.
4. To ask for deliverance or protection – The book of Esther, especially chapters 3 -7 as it pertains to Esther’s call for fasting, is a fascinating story of good vs evil in which the “bad guy” ends up bringing destruction upon himself. The best known cooperative fast in Scripture (a whole community fasting together) is likely the one that Esther called as a part of her appeal to God for protection from the king’s wrath. Fasting can be one of our first defenses against the “persecution” we face in our own lives (ie family, friends, gossip).
5. To express repentance and return to God – Joel 2:12
6. To humble Oneself before God – One of the most wicked men in Jewish history, King Ahab, eventually humbled himself before God and demonstrated it by fasting. I Kings 21:25-27
7. To express concern for the work of God – Some Christians might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experience tragedy or disappointment. Nehemiah 1:3-4
8. To minister to the needs of others – The kind of fasting that pleases God is one that results in concern for others and not just ourselves. Isaiah 58:6-7. Some people fast so that they can give the money they would have spent on food during that period to the poor or to some ministry.
9. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God – Matthew 4:1-11. The spiritual strength Jesus received during his prolonged fast of 40 days prepared him to overcome a direct onslaught of temptation from Satan. It was also during this fast that Jesus privately dedicated himself to the Father for the public ministry He would soon begin. There are times we struggle with temptation, and fasting can provide the extra spiritual strength to overcome it.
10. To express love and worship to God – Luke 2:36-37. There is an unforgettable woman named Anna. The summary of her life is found in these two verses. How Anna lived day to day is what is significant. Anna was married for only 7 years before her husband died. After the death of her husband, she spent the rest of her life, night and day, worshipping God by “fasting and praying.”

Fasting: “Blessing”

Ann Turner’s Blog (some thoughts to help you lead this conversation with your students)

Fasting from food all day has never been a part of my life. I’ve read about it in the Bible, but never thought to apply it to my own life. Because of this study, I decided to fast once a week and pray at normal meal times. The first day I fasted, I couldn't believe how hungry I was! My hunger was a constant distraction. My mind and body were screaming for food. I had to keep telling myself, “I can eat tomorrow, I can eat tomorrow, no big deal, you can do it.” Making dinner for my family was excruciating, and I felt tortured by the way my stomach dominated my whole being. It felt like the first time I was pregnant and my body was in SHOCK!

The hunger pains were so intense during the day that I didn’t think I would be able to sleep at night. However, to my amazement, I slept better than I do when I have a full belly. As I reflected on the day, I realized that, in many ways, eating had become a habit rather than an activity to nourishing my body. I was also stunned about how much I prayed and thought about God when I fasted. I was alert, focused and energetic. The constant nagging of my stomach reminded me why I was going without food – to be more aware of God and to pray for my family! My prayer life came alive. God became front and center with something as simple as skipping 3 meals!

When the day was over, I couldn’t believe I engaged in the spiritual discipline of fasting. Initially, my perspective was focused on what I was missing. However, by the end of the day my perspective became about what I gained. What began as a burden, ended as a blessing.

No matter what the reason is for fasting, it important to understand that fasting is a blessing, not blackmail. If you are fasting because you think God will give you what you want if you give something up, then your motives need to change before doing it. Fasting is to be used to draw you closer to God and focus on Him, not to get Him to do what you want.

So far in this series we have looked at the biblical history of fasting and the biblical purposes for fasting. Tonight, we are going to look at the instructions Jesus gave us for fasting, and the promise from God that we will be blessed as we do so. Tonight’s study will give the students an opportunity to dig deep into these instructions and then discuss what fasting can look like in their own lives. As your group brainstorms a list of some alternative items they can fast from besides what they eat, remind them that the most important thing about fasting is not what item they give up. The most important thing is what that item means to them and how fasting from it reminds them to stay focused on the Lord. I pray you all experience the blessing that “God will reward those who diligently seek Him” as you focus on the blessing of fasting this evening.

GOAL: (everyone's will be a little different, write yours here to remind you of what you are leading your group toward)

INTRODUCTION: Tonight we will be looking at the excuses students use for not engaging in spiritual disciplines, the blessing of engaging in spiritual disciplines, and what fasting can look like in their lives.

PRAYER: Dear God, tonight we want to understand more about how denying ourselves blesses our relationship with You. Holy Spirit, please be working through our group tonight and in our hearts as we talk about this spiritual discipline. Amen.

MEDIA/ACTIVITY/INTERACTION:

What are some examples of Natural (Day-to-Day) Disciplines? (These are things that people do on a regular basis to make their physical life better.)

- Have students brainstorm on a piece of paper excuses teenagers have for NOT engaging in any of these natural disciplines.

What are some examples of Spiritual Disciplines? (These are things that people do on a regular basis to make their spiritual life better)

-Have students brainstorm on a piece of paper excuses teenagers have for NOT engaging in these spiritual disciplines.

TRANSITION:

We engage in any kind of discipline because we believe our lives are shaped by our habits. I take out the garbage so my house doesn't smell; I exercise to keep my body in shape; I study so I can do well on my tests. If Spiritual Disciplines don't become a regular habit in our lives, we cannot expect to grow in our relationship with God. Fasting is one example of a Spiritual Discipline. Tonight we're going to look at the guideline Jesus gives for fasting, and the way we are blessed when we do it.

SCRIPTURE:

In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus leaves instructions for his disciples about fasting. Let's read through these verses and answer the following questions:

1. The negative command comes first. What are we NOT supposed to do when we fast?
2. Secondly, Jesus gives a positive command. What ARE we supposed to do when we fast?
3. Thirdly, is a promise. What does God promise to do if we fast according to God's Word?

To some extent, fasting is simple. We remove something habitual so we can experience something new. We long for the fullness of God's presence, so we remove something from our life for a period of time in order to get a glimpse of God, through prayer, in a new way. Fasting is a blessing, a gift from God, which gives us the freedom to do that.

TAKE AWAY:

We've learned that many people in the Bible have engaged in the discipline of fasting for a variety of different purposes. Tonight we learned that Jesus promises a blessing for those that are willing to deny themselves for His sake.

Are any of us willing to deny ourselves in some way this week in the hope that this act will draw us closer to God?

Not everyone can fast food. However, fasting is about why you fast not necessarily what you fast. For example, fasting from television or the Internet can be good alternative items. Let's brainstorm a list of some other alternative items we can fast from:

When you are fasting, you need to be praying at the same time. Every time you turn to do whatever it is you have given up, you can remind yourself to spend time in prayer and focus on the Lord. It is important that your times away from whatever you gave up are focused on God. Otherwise, you are just going through period of deprivation, not a spiritual discipline.

(Note: If you and your students decide to fast this week, make sure to create a time/way to process their experience the next time you meet together.)

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear God, help those of us that have committed to deny ourselves this week to be strengthened and blessed in our relationships with You! Amen.

Scripture verses that can inspire you or help you understand the act of fasting and how it can help you grow closer to God as you pray and focus:

Exodus 34:28*Moses remained there on the mountain with the Lord forty days and forty nights. In all that time he ate no bread and drank no water. And the Lord wrote the terms of the covenant—the Ten Commandments —on the stone tablets*

Deuteronomy 9:18*Then, as before, I threw myself down before the Lord for forty days and nights. I ate no bread and drank no water because of the great sin you had committed by doing what the Lord hated, provoking him to anger.*

2 Samuel 12:16-17*David begged God to spare the child. He went without food and lay all night on the bare ground. 17 The elders of his household pleaded with him to get up and eat with them, but he refused.*

Nehemiah 1:4*When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.*

Ezra 8:21-23*And there by the Ahava Canal, I gave orders for all of us to fast and humble ourselves before our God. We prayed that he would give us a safe journey and protect us, our children, and our goods as we traveled. For I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to accompany us and protect us from enemies along the way. After all, we had told the king, “Our God’s hand of protection is on all who worship him, but his fierce anger rages against those who abandon him.” So we fasted and earnestly prayed that our God would take care of us, and he heard our prayer.*

Ezra 10:6*Then Ezra left the front of the Temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He spent the night there without eating or drinking anything. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.*

Esther 4:16*Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die.*

Psalms 35:13*Yet when they were ill, I grieved for them. I denied myself by fasting for them, but my prayers returned unanswered.*

Psalms 69:10*When I weep and fast, they scoff at me.*

Isaiah 58:6*No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.*

Daniel 9:3*So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and fasting. I also wore rough burlap and sprinkled myself with ashes.*

Daniel 10:3*All that time I had eaten no rich food. No meat or wine crossed my lips, and I used no fragrant lotions until those three weeks had passed.*

Joel 2:15*Blow the ram's horn in Jerusalem! Announce a time of fasting; call the people together for a solemn meeting.*

Matthew 4:2*For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.*

Matthew 6:16*And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth that is the only reward they will ever get.*

Matthew 9:15*Jesus replied, "Do wedding guests mourn while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

Luke 2:37*Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer.*

Acts 13:3*So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.*

Acts 14:23*Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church. With prayer and fasting, they turned the elders over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*

****Special Note For Leaders****

Here is a recommendation for any students that are seriously considering a food fast.

“If you do decide to fast meals or food items, the first thing you need to do is talk to your parents and maybe even see a doctor. It is not always healthy for teenagers to fast food, and you probably will not be able to fast from all solid food. Your body is still developing, so you need nutrients. Therefore, you may want to see a doctor before you make a final decision to fast any type of food. Understand that you do not need to fast from food items in order to fast, and you may want to focus your fast on other items. Or, if you do want to fast from some sort of food, find something that will not jeopardize your health. Do you drink soda every day? Coffee? Maybe one of those items will work. Just be aware that there are health risks in fasting what you eat, and the longer you fast, the more risks there can be.”