

# On Fasting, Death, and Joy: Reflections on My Upcoming Ordination

Hugh Lynn

To me, fasting has always seemed like some sort of mechanical ritual. When church leaders have talked about fasting and state that it is a sanctioned practice in the Bible, I have always asked myself, Should I fast? What is it for? When is it appropriate?

Many people will be quick to point out that Jesus says in Matthew 6:16, “*When you fast ...*” not “*if you fast.*” So fasting is permissible. But does that mean I should fast?

There is clearly a fast that is not beneficial to perform. In Isaiah 58:1–5, God declares that the house of Jacob has transgressed in their fast. So maybe I shouldn’t fast.

But how do I know? What is fasting for?

I think a clue can be found in Matthew 9:14–17. In verse 14, the disciples of John ask Jesus, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus’s reply is, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”

Jesus is saying people are not to fast at just any time. When there is a celebration, when there is joy, this is not the time for fasting. But Jesus goes on to say, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” Fasting is a time for mourning.

Jesus gives metaphors for fasting. He says that only shrunk cloth can be used to patch an old garment. Also that new wine is put in new wineskins. The reason is clear. If unshrunk cloth is used on an old garment it will shrink in time and further damage the garment. If new wine is put in old wineskins, the fermentation process will burst the old wineskins, because they have lost their elasticity.

So will fasting destroy a person if they attempt to do it when they should be rejoicing? Fasting is for times of mourning.

So, when is an appropriate time for mourning and fasting?

What do the fasts in the Bible look like?

Moses is the first person that I know to fast in the Bible. After the incident with the golden calves, Exodus 33 and 34 recount the story of God wanting to send the people to the Promised Land without his presence. Moses interceded and asked to see the glory of God. God told Moses that no man can see God’s glory and live. God would hide Moses in the cleft of the rock and cover him with his hand. Then God would take away his hand and Moses would see God’s back. Then Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights while God gave Moses the Law.

The Bible includes accounts of fasts by David. One of these is found in 2 Samuel 1. David received news of the deaths of King Saul and Jonathan. In verses 11 and 12 it says, “Then David took hold of his clothes and

tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son.”

Another one of David’s fasts is recorded in 2 Samuel 12. David’s infidelity with Bathsheba leads to the birth of a child. The Lord sent a deathly sickness to this child. Verse 16 says, “David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.”

In 1 Kings 19, the story of Elijah’s fast is recounted. After killing the prophets of Baal, Jezebel desired to kill Elijah. So he flees, loses heart, and asks God for death. Elijah eats two meals and then goes on a fast for forty days and forty nights as he travels to the mountain of God. When at the mountain of God, God asks what Elijah is doing there. Elijah answers:

I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left and they seek my life, to take it away. (1 Kings 19:14)

Esther called for a fast when she risked her life to go before the king when not summoned (Esther 4:16). And it was not only her life that was at risk, but all of the Jews in the Persian Empire were in deathly peril.

In Daniel, there is the story of a gentile king, Darius, who unwittingly made a law that condemned Daniel to death. When the sentence of being cast into a den of lions was executed, Darius fasted all night because of Daniel (Dan. 6:18).

And what about our Lord? Jesus himself has a fast recorded in Scripture. Matthew 3:13–17 tells the story of Jesus’s baptism. Then, in chapter 4:1–11 Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Then the tempter came to Jesus and tempted him with life. In verse 3, Jesus was tempted to cling to life by commanding stones to become bread. In verse 6, Jesus is tempted to live by being protected by angels. In verse 9, Jesus was tempted to live life to the fullest by receiving all the kingdoms of the world only if he would worship the devil. But Paul says in Romans 6:3 that those “who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.”

In my quick study of fasting in the Bible, one thing stood out to make fasting appropriate—death.

Moses comes close to seeing the face of God, which no man can see and live. David fasts after the death of Saul and Jonathan. He also fasts when his child approaches death. Elijah, when fleeing for his life and even desiring death, fasts. Esther fasts when she faces death. The Gentile king, Darius, fasts when Daniel is facing death. And even death is not far away during Jesus’s fast. For his future death must have been in his mind after his baptism.

So, if I am to fast, who died? Who is dying? Who will die?

Well, me.

If I am going to do the duties of a deacon, then I must die. The list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 is a list that I have not, do not, nor ever will live up to. I have not, do not, and will not love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I have not, do not, and will not love my neighbor as myself.

In order for me to do so, I must die. Eventually, my body will die, and by God’s grace and mercy I will love him more than anything, and I will not love others less than I love myself. But until then, I have to die to my idolatries. I have to die to my worship of myself.

So I fast, because I know dying is hard. Dying hurts. Dying brings sorrow. I fast because this task set before me will kill me.

But with Jesus there is hope. With Jesus, death is a paradox and results in life! With Jesus, death is not the end. When we die, there is Jesus's life in us! Paul says it nicely in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

And that is a reason to end the fast and have great, great joy.

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