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

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## Publication Information

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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  
temped  
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.

Hugh  
Lynn  
*is a  
deacon  
in the  
Presbyterian  
Church  
in  
America  
serving  
at  
Michiana  
Covenant  
Presbyterian  
Church,  
PCA  
in  
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