



As I was getting up a few mornings ago, Helen asked me how I was feeling. My reply, "I'm so hungry I could eat this pillow!" stunned her. As an early riser, I never have breakfast or lunch, but happily survive all day on numerous cups of 'builder's brew' tea & strong black coffee. Then at about 5.30 pm I could eat for the Olympic games (!) which I know is not the ideal way to eat. That morning the only thing different was that I had planned to pray & fast, which I did, but it proved to be tortuous. Despite regular fasts for 25 years, I was struggling now, I think for 2 reasons.

Firstly, during lockdown people have been coping in different ways, often developing their own survival mechanisms that ease the stress & strain that at times for any or all of us can seem intolerable. The Head Teacher's letter last week said, "Our mental health is taking a battering... [but] WELL DONE! You are surviving a pandemic!... If [you] have had lots of microwave meals, stayed up too late, played too much... THAT'S OK!". Wise words of love, care & encouragement to chill out. M&S report an 150% increase in bedding sales since lockdown began reflecting the same thing. Some of us have allowed ourselves to have that

wee bit less self-control or discipline. In my case to deny myself physically for a spiritual purpose brought my very being into conflict with itself. God says that He will never leave us nor forsake us, so why would I bother fasting to get closer to Him? I was being lazy!

Secondly the Bible clearly teaches that there is spiritual power in fasting, so it's hardly surprising that our enemy the devil tries to hinder or stop our fast. The last thing he wants is more empowered Christians. Pete Grieg's Prayer Course quotes early 20th century Russian Bishop Theophan the Recluse, "demons can sense a faster and man of prayer from a distance, and they run far away from him so as avoid a painful blow." In this article I am reflecting briefly only on personal fasts rather than corporate fasts, which do have a role in church life & where for e.g. in Esther and Jonah, the LORD responded positively.

FASTING IN OLD TESTAMENT

There are times, crucial moments & crisis points, when individuals are called to intercede for others or for entire nations. God spoke to Ezekiel

about judgment coming because of Jerusalem's sins & said in Ez.22:30 "I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall & stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one". Later in Daniel 9 - 10, Daniel himself understanding about Jerusalem's judgment, fasted & prayed on the city's behalf (9:3). Dn 9:21-23 records that, "while I was still in prayer, Gabriel... came to me... he instructed me & said... I have come to give you insight & understanding". Instruction, insight & understanding followed prayer & fasting! After more fasting & praying in Daniel 10:12-14 we again see he gains understanding, but this time the angel's appearance was delayed because of a spiritual battle in the heavenlies. "But for 21 days the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked my way. Then Michael, one of the archangels, came to help me, because I was detained there with the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia". As we pray & fast, we do so to sharpen our spiritual discernment, to create the space to make the hearing of God's voice easier, and to intercede for various situations & people. 1 Samuel 15:22 says, "The LORD looks at the heart of a man, not the outward appearance". In a sense the heart of the fast is the position of the heart, as we allow God to see how serious we are as we engage in prayer with him.

FASTING IN NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus taught about prayer & fasting in Matthew 6, where the LORD's prayer section is followed immediately by fasting instructions 6:16-18, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Notice that Jesus at the start of v.16 does not say "if you fast", but rather "when you fast". The expectation is that His followers WILL fast. After Jesus fasted & prayed, His ministry began, a new spiritual energy was released. Likewise, when we make a fresh start it is good to fast to show God our serious intentions. There are other specific times for fasting, e.g. at the conclusion of the story in Mark 9:14 - 29 Jesus healed a boy possessed by an impure spirit & said, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer & fasting".

ON P2, DOING A FAST & THINGS TO FAST FOR.

DOING THE FAST

WHAT TO GIVE UP – many examples may include all food, or all meat, or chocolate, but also things such as alcohol, TV, internet, social media, talking, criticism, etc. If you are doing a food fast you should be wise & may need to check with your GP if you have any underlying medical conditions

HOW OFTEN TO FAST – start small & build up gradually. For e.g. with food miss a meal, then 2 meals before going a full day without. Some people fast weekly, others once a month. It is good to fast at important times such as before an important personal decision is made, or a significant challenge is faced

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD – leave time & create space to pray, write down what you think God may be speaking to you about, or if you have images or verses or songs in your mind, record them. Try to be positive & make this an enjoyable experience.

INFORMING OTHERS – if you are not going to be eating or cooking, or on social media with your usual friends, let them know beforehand so that they do not worry about you.

KEEPING GOING – prepare a range of encouraging Bible verses so that when you do get hungry or distracted (which you will) you will find help on hand from God's Word.

THE HEART – most importantly, prepare yourself willingly & with expectation to hear from God who delights in revealing more of Himself to us, His children. Be sensitive to the Spirit's leading & voice.

Responding to the Coronavirus

When it's ok not to be ok

FAST & PRAY FOR

- THE FAMILIES & FRIENDS OF THE MANY WHO HAVE DIED
- NHS & ALL KEY WORKERS
- THE SUCCESS & DISTRIBUTION OF THE VACCINES
- THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MANY IN OUR COMMUNITIES



Pray too for all those being home schooled, for parents and teachers working together to continue children's education.



As I type this at lunchtime Saturday, news is just breaking that the military have intensified their efforts at controlling the people by blocking roads & streets in Yangon, and almost entirely shutting down the Myanmar internet (it has now only 16% connectivity), so those we know in Yangon are now blacked out from hearing from us, nor can we hear from them.

