



Every fall at Bridgeway, we participate in a 40-Day Fast as a church family. The 40-Day Fast culminates in our annual Regional Worship, Prayer, and Healing Gathering that happens in November. We invite you, as a part of the Bridgeway family, to abstain from something in your life for this



period of 40 days to connect with the Lord more deeply. During this season, we want to devote extra attention to listening to His voice and responding in obedience. This document can help guide you as you enter into this season of fasting and prayer.

The purpose of the 40-Day Fast is fourfold:

1. To repent of anything that has turned our hearts cold towards God. 1 Peter 5:5 says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." We want to be honest about ways that we have sinned against God and we want to humbly seek His forgiveness and grace.
2. To unify with churches in our region. We know that God is doing powerful things to unify believers in our region, and we want to be sure to be part of that. That's why the Worship, Prayer, and Healing Gathering is a *regional* event. We want to celebrate both God's work at Bridgeway and God's work among our brothers and sisters at other churches.
3. To seek God's face for revival in our land. We invite you to join in praying that God would pour out His Spirit to bring revival to our community, state, and nation. We're asking God to deliver us from sin, bless us with a deeper awareness of His work in our lives, and bring those who are far from Him into a saving relationship with Him.
4. To prepare our hearts and minds for the Regional Worship, Prayer, and Healing Gathering. We want to enter that event as close to the Lord as we can so that we can pray with power and boldness.

At Bridgeway, we focus on two types of fasts before the Regional Worship, Prayer and Healing Gathering:

- **40 Days of Experiential Fasting** – We invite you to voluntarily remove something from your life for 40 days the purpose of connecting with the Lord more deeply. Here are a few suggestions to help you choose what you fast from:

- Choose something *noticeable*. Part of the purpose of fasting is to notice that something is missing and to allow that noticing to serve as a reminder to pray. You could choose to fast from a favorite snack or beverage, or from a common hobby such as social media or checking the news.
  - Choose something you *like*. Fasting from something you already want to avoid doesn't really work. It's helpful when your fast feels like a sacrifice, not because it's a punishment or a religious obligation, but because when you notice the absence of that thing you like, it can serve as a reminder that God is better than whatever you are missing.
  - Choose something *safe*. Fasting should never put you in danger and it should never damage relationships. If you have specific dietary needs, make sure those needs are met. If your fast will impact your family members or loved ones, make sure they know about it and are understanding.
- **Food Fasting on Wednesday** – Each Wednesday during the 40 days, we are fasting from food during the day. *Please make sure that you are careful and conscious of your health as you consider fasting from food.* You could fast from food for the entire day on Wednesday (consuming only liquids the entire day) or you could fast from one or two meals. The goal is not to be unhealthy, nor is it to prove your devotion to the Lord. The goal is to allow your physical hunger to remind you of your spiritual hunger for God and His presence. Physical hunger can also serve as a reminder to pray for whatever God has placed on your heart.

Throughout the 40 days, we want to do our best to position ourselves to hear God's voice. Intimacy with God is the ultimate point of fasting. Remember, it's not about religious duty or performance. It's about clearing away noise and distractions so that we can connect with our King.

## What is Fasting?

Nearly every major religion in the world practices fasting of some form. Even secular people fast for health reasons or in support of a political cause. So, why should Christians participate in this practice? 16<sup>th</sup>-century theologian John Calvin said,

*"Let us say something about fasting, because many, for want of knowing its usefulness, undervalue its necessity, and some reject it as almost superfluous [unnecessary]; while, on the other hand where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition."*

In the Old Testament, the primary Hebrew word that is translated “fast” is *tsom*, which means “to abstain from food.” In the New Testament, the Greek word for “fast” is *nesteuo*, which means “to abstain from eating.” In both, fasting is merely **going without food to seek God for a special reason**. Fasting is a common subject in scripture. It is mentioned some 77 times (by comparison, baptism is mentioned 75 times).

When the Bible refers to fasting, it is referring specifically to fasting from *food*. We may “fast” from things like social media, Netflix, alcohol, or some other indulgence – and there are certainly benefits to that – but it is important to remember the centrality of food to fasting. Eating is a regular rhythm in our lives, and when we fast from food for a short time (health-permitting) it seems to have a unique ability to remind us of our need to connect with God.

Even though food is central to the Bible’s definition of fasting, we can find in Jesus’ teaching inspiration for fasting from non-food items or activities that may distract us from Him. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus refers to people who hear the Word of God, but, “As they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.” (Luke 8:14) In Mark’s version of the parable, He says, “The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” (Mark 4:19) When Jesus is speaking of “pleasures of life” and “desires for other things”, he’s not referring to inherently sinful things. As John Piper says, “These are not vices. These are gifts of God. They are your basic meat and potatoes and coffee and gardening and reading and decorating and traveling and investing and TV-watching and Internet-surfing and shopping and exercising and collecting and talking. But, all of them can become deadly substitutes for God.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, fasting from these things can help keep us from leaning on these things too much, and can help remind us that God can fulfill us in ways that none of these other pleasures of life possibly could.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899– 1981), the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, delivered a great sermon on fasting while preaching through the Sermon on the Mount. In it he said,

*“Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not . . . be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.”*

**When we fast from food or abstain from human desires, it creates sacred intentional space to encounter the Lord in formational friendship. But it is never primarily about depriving**

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<sup>1</sup> Piper, John. *Hunger for God (Redesign): Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer*, Crossway, 2013, 16.

ourselves. It's about approaching the Lord with a desire for more of His power, activity and truth. Fasting is a sacrifice, to be sure, but if we're doing it out of religious obligation, we risk missing the point. The heart of fasting is expressed beautifully in Psalm 63. You may want to consider committing this passage to memory during this season.

*"O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food." (Psalm 63:1– 5)*

## What Fasting is Not

To fast in a manner that is both spiritually and physically healthy, we need to be clear about what fasting is *not*.

- *Fasting is not a hunger strike against God.* God. We don't fast to try to force God's hand or get God's attention. God is a loving Father who already gives us His attention. Instead, fasting is an opportunity to connect with God more deeply through prayer. Fasting isn't a way of coaxing God into paying more attention to us, it's a way for us to pay more attention to Him.
- *Fasting is not about religious performance.* Fasting doesn't earn you bonus points with God, and if you need to break your fast you do not need to fear God's disappointment. Fasting is an effective means of directing our thoughts towards God so that we can pray with greater frequency and intensity.
- *-Fasting is not about punishing our flesh.* We should never fast because we feel the need to punish ourselves. Jesus absorbed all of our punishment for sin. Instead, a fast is a time to ensure that our fleshly desires are not controlling us.
- *-Fasting is not about showing how committed we are to God.* Fasting is not about us at all. It's about creating additional space for God. It does not matter if you choose to fast from something minor or something major. What matters more is that you enter this season with a desire to know God more deeply through it.

## Why Practice Prayer and Fasting:

There are a variety of reasons why we can fast. While fasting is not something we do to prove ourselves or to demonstrate our spiritual maturity, it is a practice we can utilize to aid our spiritual formation. Here are some practical benefits of fasting:

- It helps us create space to listen to God's voice more clearly and pray with greater focus.
  - Fasting doesn't make God hear us any differently, but it can change the duration, intensity, and focus of our prayers.
  - Fasting has historically been a way of lending power to prayer, not because our God is resistant and needs to be won over or manipulated, but because fasting helps us to align ourselves more closely with God's will.
  - Jesus' exhortation to "ask, seek and knock" in prayer (Matt. 7:7) may deliberately be in an ascending scale of urgency. We might think of prayer with fasting as knocking loudly on the gates of heaven. John Stott says, "We resort to fasting out of a deep sense of our weakness and need in order to seek God in a more urgent, earnest, and heartfelt manner for something of great importance to us or to His kingdom."
  - Fasting helps us to humble ourselves and draw near to God by subduing our fleshly desires (Psalm 35:13; 69:10).
  - Fasting can give us greater power to resist demonic temptation and attack (Matt. 4:1-11).
  - Fasting and prayer can be a means of seeking God's revival and restoration in our land (2 Chron. 7:14).
  - Fasting seems to have a unique ability to help us grow spiritually. So many great moves of God throughout history involved men and women fasting and praying. Fasting draws us close to the heart of God so that we can better participate in His work in the world.
- It helps us remember our desire for God's glory.
  - In our busy lives, it's easy to become so focused on building our kingdom that we lose our passion for God's. Fasting reminds us of the supremacy of God's kingdom. We fast because we long for God's glory to resound among the nations. We fast because we yearn for God's Son to return and God's kingdom to come. We fast so that God will work specifically within the multitude of needs and hurts among His people. Ultimately, we fast simply because we want God more than we want anything this world has to offer us.<sup>2</sup>
- It helps us identify what is controlling us.
  - In his chapter on fasting in *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, "More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. Fasting is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside of us with food and other things."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Piper, *Hunger for God*.

<sup>3</sup> Piper, 18.

- When we fast we have to confront the discomfort of going without something. This can be both physically and emotionally uncomfortable. In the same way that we often don't realize how much we use a body part until it is injured, we tend to not realize how much we rely on food until we go without it for a period of time. Many of us are used to easing discomfort quickly. On the one hand, this is a wonderful convenience of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the other hand, it can make deprivation all the more difficult to handle. In fasting, we can allow our physical hunger to serve as a precious reminder of our hunger for God. As we realize how much our desire for food controls us (both physically and emotionally), we can redirect that desire towards our Heavenly Father.
  - This discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. We realize that we cover up what is inside us with food and other habits, addictions, and pacifiers. We discover our life is more than food (Luke 12:33), that our desires are not our god (Phil 3:19; Rom 16:18) and that our bodies are to be used for God and us (I Cor 6:13).
  - According to the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, "A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and cravings to the surface opens a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is the reminder to turn to Jesus, who alone can satisfy."
  - If you are still deciding what to fast from, it might be worth taking some time to list routine things you crave during a given week. Examples include coffee, chocolate, a glass of wine, scrolling social media, or fast food. One of these cravings might be worth fasting from during the 40-Day Fast.
- **It helps us minister to the needs of others.**
    - We can use the time we spend on whatever we're fasting from to pray for others.
    - If we're fasting from something that costs us money we can use the money we would spend on that thing to bless someone else or support a cause we care about.
    - The spiritual transformation we experience can open our eyes and increase our sensitivity to the needs of others. This can inspire us to pray for them and/or serve them.

## How long and how frequently should one fast?<sup>4</sup>

Jesus assumed His followers would fast, though He gave virtually no details about how frequently we should fast or how long we should fast for. This means that it is up to the individual to discern the type, timing, and length of their fast.

- In the Bible, the most common fast lasts for one day, from sunup to sundown.<sup>5</sup> It involves refraining from all food but not from water. A variation of this fast runs for twenty-four hours or more without food but involves drinking plenty of water. Determining the length of time to fast like this depends on circumstances and the Spirit's leading. Some people choose to do a "liquid fast" for a day, where they abstain from food but consume some calories by drinking juice or other liquids. This can be a helpful introduction for those who are new to fasting.
- Another, more intense, fast lasts for up to three or seven days,<sup>6</sup> and involves forgoing both food and sometimes water, as with Paul (Acts 9:1–19). This type of fast appears to be reserved for especially difficult and challenging situations. *We do not recommend this type of prolonged fasting without consulting with your medical professional.*
- Another less intense type of fasting is a partial fast. This is a reduction in the amount of food eaten each day and possibly a modification of what is consumed. This first appears in the life of Daniel, who observed a partial fast (presumably of vegetables and fruit) that lasted for twenty-one days. (Dan.10:2-3, 13)

## Steps to Prepare for a Fast

- Ask God to guide you in determining what to fast, when to fast, and how long to fast. Make God the focus of your fasting, seeking Him through prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation.
- Look at your schedule and determine if your fast will interfere with any plans you have to eat meals with others. If it will, you may want to give a phone call or a text message to reschedule the meal.

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<sup>4</sup> Most of these principles come from

[http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/The\\_Place\\_of\\_Fasting\\_in\\_the\\_Christian\\_Life\\_FullArticle](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/The_Place_of_Fasting_in_the_Christian_Life_FullArticle)

<sup>5</sup> Judges 20:26; 1 Sam 7:6; 2 Sam 1:12; 3:354; Neh 9:1; Jeremiah 36:6

<sup>6</sup> Three-day fasts (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9); Seven-day fasts (1 Sam 31:13; 2 Sam 12:16-23)

- If you have never fasted, or have not fasted for a long time, consider doing some short fasts to help acclimate your body to fasting. Your body is accustomed to consuming calories regularly, so it may grumble when food is cut off suddenly. As you learn to persevere through the discomfort, you will find that you can endure longer periods of fasting. The message you want to send your body is, 'I am in charge, and you will do what I say.' This is important because the body is meant to be our servant, not our master. (1 Corinthians 6:12-14).
- When you are ready to move on to a one-day fast with no food but plenty of water, a good way to start is by skipping dinner. If your last meal was lunch, you would wake up the next day with your body already well into your fast. That gives you all day to seek God in prayer and the word.
- For fasts longer than one day, you need to pay more attention to what you eat a couple of days before and for some days afterward (depending on how long you fast). *Please be very careful to monitor your health, and consult a medical professional before fasting for a long period of time.*

We hope that this document helped you better understand the heart and purpose of fasting. Remember, the 40-Day Fast leads up to the Regional Worship, Prayer and Healing Gathering on Sunday, November 17th at Bridgeway. The 40-Day Fast begins on Wednesday, October 9, 2019, at 12:01 a.m.