

LEAD! C.4 Fervent Fasting

In Which We Slow Down To Feast on the Lord's Name

Throughout the Old and New Testament, God's people have fasted to express sorrow, repentance, and desperation. In ways we only partly understand, these acts of physical denial open up our spirits to experience God in deeper and more powerful ways. For Christians, fasting is less an obligation than a privilege: the opportunity to enjoy a special time of intimacy with our Bridegroom despite his physical absence (cf. [Mark 2:18-20](#)).

Memory Verse: *"Now, therefore," says the LORD, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm."* --[Joel 2:12-13](#) (NKJV)

Assigned Reading

1. [Richard Foster: *Celebration of Discipline*](#)
 - 4. Fasting
2. [Donald Whitney: *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*](#)
 - 9. Fasting
3. [Eugene Peterson: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*](#)
 - 13. Humility: "I've Kept My Feet on the Ground"
4. [Ruth Haley Barton: *Sacred Rhythms*](#)
 - 5. Honoring the Body: Flesh-and-Blood Spirituality

Anecdote

Read [Nehemiah 1](#). Why does Nehemiah fast?

Bible

[Joel 2](#)

For this lesson we will turn to the Old Testament, to see the central role fasting plays in a time of national crisis:

[2:1](#) Blow the [trumpet](#) in Zion, And sound an [alarm](#) in My [holy](#) mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; For the day of the LORD is coming, For it is at hand:

Though we Christians see the Lord's coming as a joyous occasion, for the Israelites the day of the Lord was typically associated with judgement [C.1]:

[2](#) A day of [darkness](#) and [gloominess](#), A day of clouds and [thick darkness](#), Like the morning [clouds] spread over the mountains. A [people](#) [come], great and strong, The like of whom has never been; Nor will there ever be any [such] after them, Even for many successive generations.

Which no man can withstand:

[3](#) A [fire](#) devours before them, And behind them a [flame](#) burns; The land [is] like the Garden of Eden before them, And behind them a desolate wilderness;

Surely nothing shall escape them.

These enemies intimidate with their appearance...

[4](#) Their appearance is like the appearance of horses; And like swift steeds, so they run. [5](#) With a noise like chariots Over mountaintops they leap, Like the noise of a flaming fire that devours the stubble, Like a strong people set in battle array. [6](#) Before them the people writhe in pain; All faces are drained of color.

... and their competence:

[7](#) They run like mighty men, They climb the wall like men of war; Every one marches in formation, And they do not break ranks. [8](#) They do not push one another; Every one marches in his own column. Though they lunge between the weapons, They are not cut down. [9](#) They run to and fro in the city, They run on the wall; They climb into the houses, They enter at the windows like a thief.

While scholars disagree about exactly how much is literal versus figurative in this passage (e.g. are the "people great and strong" actually locusts?), clearly something very serious is going on:

[10](#) The earth quakes before them, The heavens tremble; The sun and moon grow dark, And the stars diminish their brightness.

Worse, this devastating force descending upon Israel is considered by God as His own private army:

[11](#) The LORD gives [voice](#) before His [army](#), For His [camp](#) is very great; For [strong](#) [is the One] who executes His word. For the day of the LORD [is] great and very terrible; Who can endure it?

If God Himself is leading enemies against us, what is left for us to do [C.2]?

Repent!

[12](#) "Now, therefore," says the LORD, "[Turn](#) to Me with all your [heart](#), With [fasting](#), with [weeping](#), and with [mourning](#)."

Though we ourselves have been reconciled to God in Christ (cf. [2 Corinthians 5:18](#)), our carnal nature (cf. [Romans 8:7](#)) still seeks to live by the world's terms, thus making it an enemy of God (cf. [James 4:4](#)). If we insist on clinging to our pride, we too will end up opposing God (cf. I [Peter 5:5](#) and [James 4:6](#)).

The solution is to pour out our hearts before God in a cry for mercy, since a broken spirit He will not despise (cf. [Psalm 51:17](#)) [C.3].

[13](#) So [rend](#) your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He [is] [gracious](#) and [merciful](#), Slow to anger, and of great [kindness](#); And He [relents](#) from doing harm. [14](#) Who knows [if] He will turn and relent, And leave a [blessing](#) behind Him-- A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your

God?

There are two important caveats noted here. First, it isn't enough to go through ritualistic ceremonies: we must humble ourselves on the inside, not just the outside. Second, fasting is no guarantee God will do whatever we ask (cf. [2 Samuel 12](#)): though He is merciful, we cannot presume on His mercy.

But we can -- and should -- ask for it:

[15](#) Blow the trumpet in Zion, [Consecrate](#) a fast, [Call](#) a sacred assembly;

No matter who we are:

[16](#) Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. [17](#) Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, "Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to [reproach](#), That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where [is] their God?' "

And if it is in accord with the glory of the Lord's name, He will answer us:

[18](#) Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, And pity His people.

And pour out blessing instead of wrath [C.4]:

[19](#) The LORD will answer and say to His people, "Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, And you will be [satisfied](#) by them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.

This is one of the paradoxes of fasting: that as we deny ourselves our own food, God provides us with His (cf. [Matthew 5:6](#)).

Another great mystery is that when we humble ourselves before God, He no longer marches with our enemies against us, but instead punishes them for their misdeeds:

[20](#) "But I will remove far from you the northern [army], And will drive him away into a barren and desolate land, With his face toward the eastern sea And his back toward the western sea; His stench will come up, And his foul odor will rise, Because he has done [monstrous](#) things."

Instead of dreading the awful ("[gadal](#)") work of the enemy, we can rejoice in the awesome ("[gadal](#)") work of the Lord:

[21](#) Fear not, O land; Be [glad](#) and [rejoice](#), For the LORD has done [marvelous](#) things! [22](#) Do not be afraid, you beasts of the field; For the open pastures are springing up, And the tree bears its fruit; The fig tree and the vine yield their strength. [23](#) Be glad then, you children of Zion, And rejoice in the LORD your God; For He has given you the former rain faithfully, And He will cause the rain to come down for you-- The former rain, And the latter rain in the first [month]. [24](#) The threshing floors shall be full of wheat, And the vats shall

overflow with new wine and oil.

And more marvelous yet -- He promises not just a glorious future, but even a redemption of the tragic past:

[25](#) "So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you.

Wow. *Selah*. [C.5]

[26](#) You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; And My people shall never be put to [shame](#).

We do not fast out of some ascetic need to punish ourselves, but in the hope of feasting again when God's glory (and name) is revealed. We humble ourselves and own up to our shame so that it can ultimately be taken away forever:

[27](#) Then you shall know that I [am] in the [midst](#) of Israel: I [am] the LORD your God And there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame.

Our ultimate goal is to experience the manifest presence of God in our midst, and thus be transformed -- and become transformers:

[28](#) "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My [Spirit](#) on all [flesh](#); your sons and your daughters shall [prophesy](#), your old men shall [dream](#) dreams, your young men shall see [visions](#). [29](#) And also on [My] menservants and on [My] maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

So that we are on the right side of history when the final day of the Lord comes:

[30](#) "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. [31](#) The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. [32](#) And it shall come to pass [That] whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the LORD has said, Among the remnant whom the LORD calls.

The Lord is calling us even now. Will humble ourselves to call on Him?

Conversation

1. Do you see the Lord's coming as a time of judgment? In a good or bad way?
2. Have you ever felt that God opposed you? Why?
3. When have you cried out to God for mercy? Did He answer?
4. How has God turned a crisis in your life into a blessing?
5. What shames from your pre-Christian past has God redeemed?

Decision

- **Repentance:** Fast, weep, and mourn over the ways you've mocked God.

- Action: Ask God for His Spirit to grant you prophecies, dreams, or visions.
- Worship: Call on the "name" of the Lord, as revealed in this passage.

Explore More

- [Fast, Fasting – International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#)
- [Day of the Lord \(yahweh\) – International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#)
- [Joel \(2\) – International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#)
- [7 Basic Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer :: Campus Crusade for Christ International](#)
- [Prayer, Fasting, and the Course of History :: Desiring God Christian Resource Library](#)
- [Fasting – Spirit Home](#)
- [YouTube – Lord of the Past](#)

For Next Week

For next week, read [2 Timothy 2](#). What does Paul command Timothy to study the word?

Memory Verse: *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."* -- [2 Timothy 2:15](#) (NKJV)

References

1. **Blue Letter Bible.** "[Joel 2](#) – New King James Version." Blue Letter Bible. 1996–2009. 27 Mar 2009. < <http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?t=NKJV&b=Joel&c=2> >
2. **New King James Version (NKJV)** Copyright © 1982 by [Thomas Nelson, Inc.](#)

