

## FINDING GOD THROUGH FASTING

The Rest Stops for this month revolve around the spiritual discipline of fasting. For many Christians, this is a natural time to fast because of the season of Lent. Giving up something for Lent is a very good way of preparing for the death and resurrection of Christ.

Please heed a note of caution before you do the following Rest Stops. Some person should not practice fasting for medical reasons. If you are one of these persons, or think you are one of these persons, please check with your doctor before fasting from food. You should “fast” from other things upon which you depend: TV, Friday night movies, etc. Some of the Rest Stops below have been written with these other fasts in mind.

### **REST STOP #1: Taste and See that the Lord is Good**

*By Michele Hershberger*

Fasting. If there were ever a concept that put fear into the hearts of many, it's this one. Fasting is hard to do. I like to eat. I like my routine, and part of my routine is to eat. Or watch Raymond on TV. Or instant message with my buddies every night. Or a whole host of other things.

And then there's the whole legalistic thing. What if I get all knotted up inside about an exact number of hours that I must fast and I miss God's grace? What if I fast only to show off my Christian prowess with my super strength fast? What if I make this exercise into Extreme Sports for Christians?

I don't know about you, but I don't think I need to worry too much about showing off. Maybe that is an issue for some Christians, but I have the opposite problem.

I don't want to do this.

It hurts.

It breaks my routine.

It's inconvenient.

I'll get hungry.

But you know what? These things that I love so dearly, things that I depend on and cherish and rely upon, these good things—might actually be barriers to the really good thing—God. Remember how an apple tastes when you haven't had an apple for so long? Maybe that how God tastes when it's been awhile. And maybe that how an apple will taste to me after this fast. Everything will taste better. That's a good thing.

### **REST STOP #2: At the River Ahava**

*By Megan Yoder*

“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves and our children, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him. So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.” Ezra 8:21-23 NRSV

In these verses we read about the fasting of the second group of those who were exiled

to Babylon. Ezra did not want to rely on the king and his soldiers for safety so he calls the people to a time of corporate fasting and prayer. They prayed for God's safety for their journey. Through this corporate fasting and prayer, God listened to their petitions and gave them safety.

Do we fast and pray when we are wanting or needing things from God? Are we serious enough about them to deny ourselves food to petition with God? Ezra wanted God's protection and by fasting, he received it. Now fasting doesn't mean you necessarily get everything you want. Fasting is more than that. Joel 2:12 says, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." NRSV Fasting is more than just denying yourself food; it is a way to reconnect with God. To fast means to truly tune yourself into God to listen to what He has to say to you, without the distractions of life, whether that be food or anything else.

We know that fasting is an important discipline to practice because Jesus fasted for forty days. If the Son of God fasted, how much more do we need to? What is it that keeps you from God? Is it food, television, Internet, talking, a relationship? There are many distractions in this world we live in today. Look at your life and find the thing that you rely on more than God. Take time to fast from this and to look to God. Once you have decided what and how long you are going to fast, remember what we are told in Matthew 6:16-18:

"And whenever you fast, so not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." NRSV

### **REST STOP #3: Definitions, Details and Actually Doing It**

*By Janene Goertzen*

**Dependent** – unable to exist, sustain oneself, or act appropriately or normally without the assistance or direction of another.

Based on this definition and your understanding of what it means to rely on someone/ something, begin by making a list of everything that you depend on. It may be helpful to go through your daily schedule and write down any activity, habit, or person that helps you make it through the day. Don't forget the little things like the cup of coffee in the morning or the 30-minute sitcom on TV or the chat on MSN.

Now look at your list and prayerfully consider if any of these habits are taking away from your relationship with God. Are you relying on things other than God himself to make it through every day? If you took away your morning cup of coffee or your evening dessert or that 30-minute sitcom, would you feel like you were missing something? Spend a few moments thinking about what it'd be like to give those things to God.

**Fast** – to abstain from food; to eat very little or abstain from certain food, especially as a religious discipline

Now, based on this definition, look through your list of dependencies. What would it take for you to "fast" from one of these things? How would you fill that time, craving, or void? Spend a few moments in prayer to seek what God may be asking you to give up. Pray for Him to guide you and fill those voids.

Read Hebrews 12:1-2 – We are instructed to throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that entangles us. We are to look to Jesus. Write down a few ways that you can do that through fasting – whether it be from food or an activity.

Spend time in prayer once again. Ask God to reveal the habits that He wants to begin to fill and replace. Are you willing to surrender your computer for a week if it means spending more time growing closer to God? Are you willing to not eat for 24-48 hours if it means learning to rely on God through times of stress and boredom rather than turning to food? Fill in the blank with your own habit. What is God saying to you?

Now it's time to put **fasting** into action. Choose one item off your list and commit it to God. Give it to Him. Ask God to fill those minutes, thoughts, and feelings with His fullness. Pray for righteous motives during this fast. Write Hebrews 12:1-2 on a notecard and place it on the pantry door, computer screen, or other location corresponding with your fast. Whenever tempted to give in, read the verse and say a prayer – committing to rely on God rather than something else.

## REST STOP #4: Tapeworms

*By Eric Miller*

*"Is this the kind of fast that I have chosen...?" Isa. 58:5*

I remember reading a book called **Bruchko**, an autobiography of a man named Bruce Olsen. He was a young man who was called to take the gospel to several unreached Indian tribes in South America. On one of his first encounters with the Motilone Indians, an extremely violent tribe, he was prompted by the Spirit to flee in the middle of the night. As he began his long journey back to civilization, he didn't take time to stop and rest or eat. After several days of endless walking he collapsed, famished and weary and began to sleep. While he was sleeping, he began to dream that a butterfly was trying to fly into his mouth. As he awoke he still felt the fluttering in his throat, so he opened his mouth and proceeded to remove an 18-inch tapeworm that was dissatisfied with his lack of nourishment and began searching for food.

While this illustration may be a little disgusting, I believe it is an accurate portrayal of what happens when we deny ourselves from those things that have become excessive attachments. For example, when we abstain from food, it doesn't take very long before our body begins to groan for the satisfaction that it's accustomed to. The hunger pangs however, are not the only things that begin to surface during a time of fasting. Many times our attitudes and hidden carnal needs of pride, anger, and greed, become exposed and present us with the opportunity to allow God to deal with them. I believe that this is the kind of fast that the Lord has chosen. It is not the act of abstinence that the Lord is pleased with, but the desire to put him in his proper place: on the throne of your heart. True fasting cannot be simply an act of the will, or your will is what you'll worship. Fasting must be the result of a deep desire to be transformed into the likeness of God.

Fasting is an integral part of worship and has great value for the believer, but we must be attentive to the evil inside of us that surfaces and allow God to change us. True fasting brings us to the place where we begin "to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)