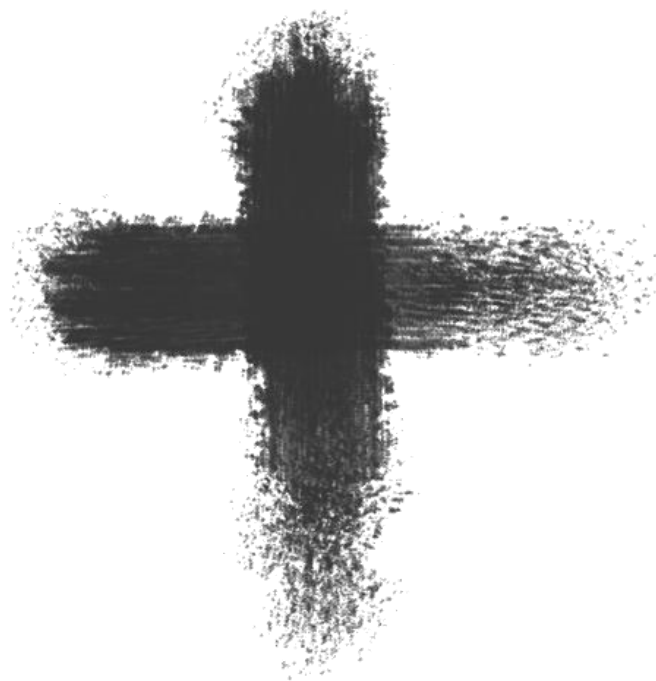


Lenten Fast & Prayer

A Guide by Toa Payoh Methodist Church



2024

14 Feb ~ 30 Mar

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Lent & Fasting

Lent is a season of forty days, excluding Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday (14 February 2024) and ends on Holy Saturday (29 March 2024), the eve of Easter Sunday. It is a season that reminds us of Jesus' journey to the cross, and what that means for Christians to follow Him. Fasting, together with prayer and works of mercy, is a spiritual discipline that Christians are encouraged to practice during this season. As Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-14) and denied Himself to give His life for the world, so Christians fast and practise denying ourselves that we may serve others. (Matthew 16:24)

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is often neglected in our modern day of abundance and feasting. There are also misconceptions, or lack of understanding when it comes to fasting.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, regularly fasted twice a week – every Wednesday and Friday. He did so with a desire to be more like Jesus; to be perfected in love towards God and others. From the Bible, Wesley recognised fasting as a “means of grace” – a means which God has given to aid us to encounter Him more closely; a means to know more deeply His will, presence and power to save us from our sins, and help us to grow to be like Him as His beloved children.

In that spirit, fasting, with prayer and works of mercy, is also God's means of helping us in TPMC grow in our HIGHER values.

Honour: In changing our usual routine for a season to use our usual time of eating to seek the Lord, we honour God.

Integrity: In fasting and works of mercy, we practise integrity in following Jesus to deny ourselves and carry our cross for the sake of God and others.

Generosity: In setting aside the money that we usually spend on meals and giving it to help the less fortunate, we practise generosity.

Humility: In being willing to change our daily routine to seek God's will and live with concern for others, we practise humility.

Excellence: In intentionally setting a time to fast and pray, we offer to God our best, and not leftovers, of time.

Rest: In fasting, prayer and works of mercy, we know God more and our faith in Him increases, and our anxious hearts find true rest in the confidence that we know Him, He knows us, and we are living according to His will.

Fasting is abstaining from our trust and dependence on something (usually food and other indulgences) and affirming that our trust and dependence is ultimately on God. And out of such trust and dependence on God flows strength to not worry for ourselves and instead to give ourselves sacrificially to love and serve others. (Matthew 6:16-34) Through the means of grace of fasting and prayer in Lent, we will look to the cross of Christ, encounter God in a very personal and powerful way, and grow in love for God and others.

This Lent, take time to fast, pray and wait upon the Lord, seeking to know Him more truly and follow Him more closely. (Mark 8:34; 14:38)

Lenten Offering

Apart from prayer and fasting, Lent is also marked by the practice of acts of mercy towards others. As you fast, for the money that would have been spent on the meal, consider setting it aside as an offering to give towards the ministry of Outreach and Social Concerns in TPMC. You can

- Give on each day that you fast OR set it aside until the end of Holy Week to give in total.
 - *E-Giving*: Indicate “**Poor & Needy Fund**” in the reference section.
 - *Offering Box (in Sunday Services)*: Put in an envelope and mark “**Poor & Needy Fund**”.

Isaiah 58: 6-7

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

What Fasting is Not

The motivation and purpose of fasting is to draw near to God in prayer, and be spiritually transformed to be like Christ in our relationship with God and others.

- It is not a diet plan for losing weight.
- It does not make us more spiritual than others who do not fast.
- We must not take a legalistic approach.
- It is not a hunger strike to “arm-twist” God for a request to get what we want.

Misconceptions About Fasting

1. *Fasting is bad for health.*

A misconception is that fasting may cause gastric problems or puts our body into a starvation mode. Prolonged nutrient and calorie deficit can cause health problems but skipping a meal a day certainly will not put the body into a starvation mode. Instead, short term fasts increase the metabolic rate and the stored fat in the body acts as fuel for the body to function.

Medical studies have shown that short term fasting can improve insulin sensitivity, reduce stress and inflammation, and induces a cellular repair process¹.

2. *Fasting is about not eating food.*

While the practice of fasting is typically abstaining from food for a certain period of time, the spiritual discipline of fasting is not just about not eating. The act of turning away from dependence on physical food is a reminder for us to turn to dependence on God for spiritual transformation.

If you are not able to fast from food due to health or medical reasons, there are other various types of fast you can do (eg, fast from sugar, caffeine, social media, gaming, etc.). There is also a social mercy

¹ Alirezaei M, Kemball CC, Flynn CT, Wood MR, Whitton JL, Kiosses WB. Short-term fasting induces profound neuronal autophagy. *Autophagy*. 2010;6(6):702-710. doi:10.4161/auto.6.6.12376

dimension to fasting during Lent as well. We are encouraged to practice acts of mercy in social outreach and social justice. (Isaiah 58:1-11) This is why as we fast this year, we also practise giving towards those in need. It is basically turning away from indulgences and turning to God.

3. I know I don't have the discipline, so I might as well not try.

Disciplines start from somewhere and does not happen overnight. Just like how we gain the discipline of reading the Bible, worshipping God, or serving in church by taking small practical steps, the spiritual discipline of fasting is not daunting. If you're new to fasting, you might begin by fasting a meal a day.

If in the process, you give in to your hunger/cravings, acknowledge your struggles to the Lord. Then try again. If it is your desire to grow in spiritual dependence on God, the Holy Spirit will certainly give you the strength and discipline to do so.

4. Fasting is for overly religious zealots.

Some may have the misconception that only very pious and overly religious people fast. But biblical fasting has been practiced for thousands of years for spiritual purposes by many people.

- Jesus fasted for 40 days before He began His public ministry (Luke 4:1-2).
- Nehemiah (Cupbearer to king) fasted to help him confess his sins to God, and prayed for favour from the king of Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4).
- David (Shepherd and king) fasted to ask God to intervene because of injustice (Psalm 69:10)
- Mordecai and the Jews (Ordinary people) fasted upon receiving news of the plot for genocide against the Jews (Esther 4:3).
- The early church (Ordinary people) practiced fasting with worship (Acts 13:2) and sought God's guidance for the appointment of leaders through fasting (Acts 14:23).

Types of Fast

Partial Fasts

1. *The Wesley Fast*

John Wesley fasted weekly on Wednesdays and Fridays. He fasted from solid foods and took only water or tea from sundown (about 7pm) on Tuesday until 3pm Wednesday afternoon; and from sundown on Thursday until 3pm Friday afternoon.

2. *The Daniel Fast*

Daniel lived in Babylon during the time when Israel was exiled. For three weeks, he abstained from “delicacies” like meat and wine (Daniel 10:3).

3. *No Solid Food Fast*

This means to abstain from solid, chewable food. You can take juice, soup or other liquid drinks that will provide you with more energy than water-only fasts.

4. *Media Fast*

Indulgences that we have become so dependent and even addicted in our modern society today is the consumption of media. A media fast is to abstain from using social media (eg, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram) and/or media entertainment (eg, digital games, Netflix, TV), and to use the time instead to read the Bible, read Christian literature, worship God through songs and praying.

Complete Fasts

A complete fast means drinking only water for an extended period. The average healthy person can go without food between 21 and 40 days. Do consult your doctor before beginning any full fast lasting longer than three days.

How to Fast

If you're fasting for the first time, or you have not practiced fasting for quite a while, begin by fasting a meal or two in a week.

Before the Fasting Period

1. Pray and decide what kind of fast you will do.
2. Start cutting back or reducing your intake of caffeinated drinks and soft drinks as these tend to dehydrate you and are not good for the digestive system.

During the Fasting Period

1. Make sure to always drink plenty of plain water while fasting. During the first few days, it is not uncommon to experience headaches as you abstain from taking caffeine.
2. Do not brag or announce to others that you are fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). But you don't have to be secretive about it either. You may want to let a few trusted friends or family members know for accountability purposes or for practical reasons. (E.g. letting the family know why you are not having a meal with them; informing them not to cook your portion.)
3. The time spent fasting should be set aside for prayer, worship and reading the Bible. It should be unhurried time. Find a conducive location or space where you will be undisturbed. Take time to be still to listen to God. Have your journal and record what God impressed on you through Scripture and prayer.
4. Sleep early.

Ending the Fast

1. If you plan to fast for a meal/day or two, you can break the fast with a small glass of fruit juice, soy milk, soup or porridge. Then gradually have easily digestible foods like fish, vegetables and fresh fruit.

2. If you plan for an extended fast for a few days, you can break the fast with liquid foods for a few days before slowly introducing solid foods in small quantities thereafter.
3. Whether you are fasting for a short or an extended period, never break your fast with large amounts of food and having a heavy meal. Avoid spicy and oily food when breaking a fast.

This Lent, take time to come humbly before God, meditate on His word and seek His face. As you prepare to fast, come with expectancy for God to reveal fresh spiritual insights; allow the Holy Spirit to reveal areas in your life to change. Have faith in the transforming power of God and His sufficient grace for spiritual formation in your life.

1 Thessalonians 5:17-24

... pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.



Further Reading & Reflection on Fasting

1. Purpose:

- Exodus 12:14-20 (abstention from certain foods as a memorial act)
- 1 Samuel 7:2-6 (to express contrition and repentance)
- 1 Samuel 31:1-13 (to express deep sorrow and anguish)
- 2 Samuel 12:1-23 (to express contrition and to pray deeply)
- 1 Kings 21:27-29 (to express grief and humility)
- 2 Chronicles 20:1-30 (to express desperation and to seek God's direction and help)
- Ezra 8:21-23 (to express trust and dependence on God alone)
- Nehemiah 1:1-11 (to express deep sadness and to seek God's help)
- Nehemiah 9:1-11 (as a corporate expression of contrition and repentance and to listen to the word of God)
- Esther 4:1-17 (to express desperation and mourning; to seek God's favour and help)
- Psalm 35:13-14 (to intercede for others before God)
- Psalm 69:10-11 (to lament before God against injustice)
- Psalm 109:21-25 (to express neediness and to seek God's help against oppression)
- Daniel 1:1-20 (to express dedication and loyalty to God)
- Daniel 9:2-19 (to petition earnestly before God)
- Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15 (as a corporate expression of repentance and returning to the Lord)
- Jonah 3:1-10 (to express taking the word and judgment of God seriously)
- Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-11 (to express total dependence on God; as a period of preparation for an important task)

- Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29 (together with prayer, a means for growth in faith)
- Luke 2:36-37 (to express dedication and worship to God)
- Acts 13:3; 14:23 (as an act of dedicating something to God and preparation for an important task)

2. Instruction on True Fasting

- Isaiah 58:1-11; Zechariah 7:1-10 (true fasting has a concern for justice and righteousness)
- Matthew 6:16-18 (not for boasting; but with purity of motive and sincerity of heart)
- Matthew 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35 (Jesus expected His disciples to fast)

3. John Wesley on Fasting as a Means of Grace

- “The Means of Grace” (Sermon 16) – A summary in modern English: <https://kevinmwatson.com/2020/08/04/john-wesleys-sermon-the-means-of-grace-a-brief-summary/>
- “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon On The Mount: Discourse Seven” (Sermon 27) – A summary in modern English: <https://kevinmwatson.com/2020/10/13/john-wesleys-sermon-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mount-discourse-the-seventh-a-brief-summary/>
- “On Zeal” (Sermon 92), <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-92-on-zeal/>

