

A HUNGER FOR GOD

*Desiring God
Through Fasting and Prayer*

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PREFACE

Beware of books on fasting. The Bible is very careful to warn us about people who “advocate abstaining from foods, which God created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The apostle Paul asks with dismay, “Why . . . do you submit yourself to decrees, such as ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch?’” (Colossians 2:20-21). He is jealous for the full enjoyment of Christian liberty. Like a great declaration of freedom over every book on fasting flies the banner, “Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (1 Corinthians 8:8). There once were two men. One said, “I fast twice a week”; the other said, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Only one went down to his house justified (Luke 18:12-14).

The discipline of self-denial is fraught with dangers—perhaps only surpassed by the dangers of indulgence. These also we are warned about: “All things are lawful for me, *but I will not be mastered by anything*” (1 Corinthians 6:12). What masters us has become our god; and Paul warns us about those “whose god

is their appetite” (Philippians 3:19). Appetite dictates the direction of their lives. The stomach is sovereign. This has a religious expression and an irreligious one. Religiously “persons . . . turn the grace of our God into licentiousness” (Jude 4) and tout the slogan, “Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food” (1 Corinthians 6:13). Irreligiously, with no pretext of pardoning grace, persons simply yield to “the desires for other things [that] enter in and choke the word” (Mark 4:19).

“Desires for other things”—there’s the enemy. And the only weapon that will triumph is a deeper hunger for God. The weakness of our hunger for God is not because he is unsavory, but because we keep ourselves stuffed with “other things.” Perhaps, then, the denial of our stomach’s appetite for food might express, or even increase, our soul’s appetite for God.

What is at stake here is not just the good of our souls, but also the glory of God. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. The fight of faith is a fight to feast on all that God is for us in Christ. What we hunger for most, we worship.

*His goodness shines with brightest rays
When we delight in all his ways.
His glory overflows its rim
When we are satisfied in him.
His radiance will fill the earth
When people revel in his worth.
The beauty of God’s holy fire
Burns brightest in the heart’s desire.*

Between the dangers of self-denial and self-indulgence there is a path of pleasant pain. It is not the pathological pleasure of a masochist, but the passion of a lover’s quest: “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). That is the path we will try to follow in this book.

That I could even attempt the journey is owing to God's grace, which I live on every day. It has come to me in Jesus who loved me and gave himself for me. It has come to me in my wife, Noël, who supports me in the work of preaching and writing and tending the flock. I love you, Noël, and thank you for your partnership in the great work. God has been good to us. Grace has come to me again in the faithful labors of Carol Steinbach, whose careful reading has left its mark, and whose industry created the indexes. And grace has come to me through my fellow elders at Bethlehem Baptist Church. They forged a mission statement for our church that I embrace as the mission of my life. And they gave me the charge and the time to write this book and make it a part of that mission: "We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples." That is my prayer for this book. When God is the supreme hunger of our hearts, he will be supreme in everything.

John Piper
May 1, 1997

*Whom have I in heaven but thee?
And there is nothing upon earth
that I desire besides thee.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion for ever.*

—PSALM 73:25-26, RSV

Almost everywhere at all times fasting has held a place of great importance since it is closely linked with the intimate sense of religion. Perhaps this is the explanation for the demise of fasting in our day. When the sense of God diminishes, fasting disappears.

—EDWARD FARRELL¹

INTRODUCTION

A Homesickness for God

The birthplace of Christian fasting is homesickness for God. In the summer of 1967 I had been in love with Noël for a whole year. If you had told me then that we would have to wait another year and a half to marry, I would have protested firmly. For us, it seemed, the sooner the better. It was the summer before my senior year in college. I was working as a water safety instructor at a Christian athletic camp in South Carolina. She was hundreds of miles away working as a waitress.

Never had I known an aching like this one. I had been homesick before, but never like this. Every day I would write her a letter and talk about this longing. In the late morning, just before lunch, there would be mail call. When I heard my name and saw the lavender envelope, my appetite would be taken away. Or, more accurately, my hunger for food was silenced by the hunger of my heart. Often, instead of eating lunch with the campers, I would take the letter to a quiet place in the woods and sit down on the leaves for a different kind of meal. It wasn't the real thing. But the color, the smell, the script, the message, the signature were fore-

tastes. And with them, week by week, I was strengthened in hope, and the reality just over the horizon was kept alive in my heart.

The Romance and the Resistance of Fasting

Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God. But the story of my heart-hunger to be with Noël could be misleading. It tells only half the story of Christian fasting. Half of Christian fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. The other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense. In the first half, appetite is lost. In the second half, appetite is resisted. In the first, we yield to the higher hunger that is. In the second, we fight for the higher hunger that isn't. Christian fasting is not only the spontaneous effect of a superior satisfaction in God; it is also a chosen weapon against every force in the world that would take that satisfaction away.

God's Greatest Adversaries Are His Gifts

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18-20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.

Jesus said some people hear the word of God, and a desire

for God is awakened in their hearts. But then, “as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and *pleasures of this life*” (Luke 8:14). In another place he said, “*The desires for other things* enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mark 4:19). “The pleasures of this life” and “the desires for other things”—these are not evil in themselves. 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. And all of them can become deadly substitutes for God.

The Deadening Effects of Innocent Delights

Therefore, when I say that the root of Christian fasting is the hunger of homesickness for God, I mean that we will do anything and go without anything if, by any means, we might protect ourselves from the deadening effects of innocent delights and preserve the sweet longings of our homesickness for God. Not just food, but anything. Several years ago I called our people to fast for a twenty-four-hour period once a week (breakfast and lunch on Wednesdays, if possible) during the month of January. We were facing huge issues of self-assessment and direction, and we needed the fullness of God’s presence with all his wisdom and purifying power. Within a few days I got this note in the mail:

I’m behind this. I think God is in it. It doesn’t work for me on Wednesday. I’m with people over lunch every day. So I have a couple of things I believe are from the Spirit that may be more of a fast for some than food. I thought not watching television for a week, or for a month, or a night of the week when I normally watch it, might be more of a fast than food. Instead of watching my favorite program, I might

spend the time talking and listening to God. I wonder if there might be others for whom this would be a fast and would be a focused time of prayer to them.

I said to the congregation the next Sunday, “Amen. If you say, ‘Fasting on Wednesday doesn’t work for me,’ that’s okay. If your heart is right and you’re open to the Lord and you’re asking him, ‘Lord, draw me into the spirit of awakening through fasting,’ he will show you. He’ll show you when and how. If your health doesn’t allow for that, if the doctor says, ‘No fasting for you,’ that’s fine. The Great Physician knows all about that, and something else will work for you.”

The issue is not food *per se*. The issue is anything and everything that is, or can be, a substitute for God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, delivered a great sermon on fasting when he was preaching through the Sermon on the Mount in 1959-1960. 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.²

My assumption so far has been that good things can do great damage. Oxen and fields and marriage can keep you out of the kingdom of heaven. Which is why Jesus says, “No one of you can be my disciple who does not bid farewell to *all his own possessions*” (Luke 14:33, author’s translation³). *Anything* can stand in the way of true discipleship—not just evil, and not just food, but anything. Nor should it be surprising that the greatest com-

petitors for our devotion and affection for God would be some of his most precious gifts.

When Abraham Preferred God to the Life of His Son

How does fasting help us keep from turning gifts into gods? Consider the almost-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. When Abraham had stretched out his hand to kill his son and the heir of God's promise, "the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me'" (Genesis 22:11-12). Now here was a radical kind of fast: the sacrifice of a son. God did not call for this "fast" because Isaac was evil. On the contrary, it was because in Abraham's eyes he was so good. Indeed he seemed indispensable for the fulfillment of God's promise. Fasting is not the forfeit of evil but of good.

But why would God call for such a thing? Because it was a test. Does Abraham delight in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:3) more than he delights in his own son? God spoke through the angel: "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." These words, "now I know"—what do they mean? Did God not know that Abraham was a God-fearing man and that he valued God above his son? The Bible teaches that God "knows the hearts of all men" (1 Kings 8:39; Acts 1:24); indeed, he "fashions the hearts of them all" (Psalm 33:15). Why then the test? Here is the way C. S. Lewis answers the question,

[I am concerned with the question] "If God is omniscient he must have known what Abraham would do, without any experiment; why, then, this needless torture?" But as St.

Augustine points out, whatever God knew, Abraham at any rate did not know that this obedience would endure such a command until the event taught him; and the obedience which he did not know that he would choose, he cannot be said to have chosen. The reality of Abraham's obedience was the act itself; and what God knew in knowing that Abraham "would obey" was Abraham's actual obedience on that mountain top at that moment. To say that God "need not have tried the experiment" is to say that because God knows, the thing known by God need not exist.⁴

God wills to know the actual, lived-out reality of our preference for him over all things. And he wills that we have the testimony of our own authenticity through acts of actual preference of God over his gifts. Lewis is right that God may as well not have created the world, but only imagined it, if his knowing what "would be" is as good as his knowing it in the very act. God wills that he have an experiential-knowing, an actual seeing-knowing, a watching-knowing. A real lived-out human act of preference for God over his gifts is the actual lived-out glorification of God's excellence for which he created the world. Fasting is not the only way, or the main way, that we glorify God in preferring him above his gifts. But it is one way. And it is a way that can serve all the others.

Eating as the Anesthesia of Sadness

Lewis referred to St. Augustine. What Augustine said was this: "For the most part, the human mind cannot attain to self-knowledge otherwise than by making trial of its powers through temptation, by some kind of experimental and not merely verbal self-interrogation."⁵ In other words, we easily deceive ourselves that we love God unless our love is frequently put to the test, and we must show our preferences not merely with words but with

sacrifice. Admittedly the sacrifice of a son says more than the sacrifice of a sandwich. But the principle is the same. And many small acts of preferring fellowship with God above food can form a habit of communion and contentment that makes one ready for the ultimate sacrifice. This is one way that fasting serves all our acts of love to God. It keeps the preferring faculty on alert and sharp. It does not let the issue rest. It forces us to ask repeatedly: do I really hunger for God? Do I miss him? Do I long for him? Or have I begun to be content with his gifts?

Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us. What are our bottom-line passions? In his chapter on fasting in *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, “More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This 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.”⁶

Psychologically, that sort of thing is spoken of a lot today, especially in regard to people who have much pain in their lives. We would say they “medicate” their pain with food. They anesthetize themselves to the hurt inside by eating. But this is not some rare, technical syndrome. All of us do it. Everybody. No exceptions. We all ease our discomfort using food and cover our unhappiness by setting our eyes on dinnertime. Which is why fasting exposes all of us—our pain, our pride, our anger. Foster continues:

If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David said, “I humbled my soul with fasting” [Psalm 35:13]. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first, we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger. And then, we know that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.⁷

One of the reasons for fasting is to know what is in us—just as Abraham showed what was in him. In fasting it will come out. You will see it. And you will have to deal with it or quickly smother it again. When midmorning comes and you want food so badly that the thought of lunch becomes as sweet as a summer vacation, then suddenly you realize, “Oh, I forgot, I made a commitment. I can’t have that pleasure. I’m fasting for lunch too.” Then what are you going to do with all the unhappiness inside? Formerly, you blocked it out with the hope of a tasty lunch. The hope of food gave you the good feelings to balance out the bad feelings. But now the balance is off. You must find another way to deal with it.

The Hungry Handmaid of Faith

At these points we really begin to discover what our spiritual resources are. The things I discover about my soul are so valuable for the fight of faith. I almost subtitled this book: *Fasting—the Hungry Handmaid of Faith*. What a servant she is! Humbly and quietly, with scarcely a movement, she brings up out of the dark places of my soul the dissatisfactions in relationships, the frustrations of the ministry, the fears of failure, the emptiness of wasted time. And just when my heart begins to retreat to the delicious hope of eating supper with friends at Pizza Hut, she quietly reminds me: not tonight. It can be a devastating experience at first. Will I find spiritual communion with God sweet enough, and hope in his promises deep enough, not just to cope, but to flourish and rejoice in him? Or will I rationalize away my need to fast and retreat to the medication of food? The apostle Paul said, “I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Fasting reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us—or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God.

Why Did God Create Bread and Hunger?

One of the reasons food has this amazing power is that it is so basic to our existence. Why is this? I mean, why did God create bread and design human beings to need it for life? He could have created life that has no need of food. He is God. He could have done it any way he pleased. Why bread? And why hunger and thirst? My answer is very simple: He created bread so that we would have some idea of what the Son of God is like when he says, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). And he created the rhythm of thirst and satisfaction so that we would have some idea of what faith in Christ is like when Jesus said, “He who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). God did not have to create beings who need food and water and who have capacities for pleasant tastes.

But man is not the center of the universe, God is. And everything, as Paul says, is “from him and through him and to him” (Romans 11:36). “To him” means everything exists to call attention to him and to bring admiration to him. In Colossians 1:16, Paul says more specifically that “all things were created by [Christ] and for [Christ].” Therefore bread was created for the glory of Christ. Hunger and thirst were created for the glory of Christ. And fasting was created for the glory of Christ.

Which means that bread magnifies Christ in two ways: by being eaten with gratitude for his goodness, and by being forfeited out of hunger for God himself. When we eat, we taste the emblem of our heavenly food—the Bread of Life. And when we fast we say, “I love the Reality above the emblem.” In the heart of the saint both eating and fasting are worship. Both magnify Christ. Both send the heart—grateful and yearning—to the Giver. Each has its appointed place, and each has its danger. The danger of eating is that we fall in love with the gift; the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and glory in our willpower.

How the Book Is Organized

There is no safe and easy way home to heaven. The hard and narrow way is strewn with obstacles and many fatal paths of innocent pleasure. There is a war to be fought within and without. And one of the weapons along the way is fasting. Therefore this book has an inward and an outward thrust. It's about the inward war with our own appetites that compete with hunger for God. And it's about the outward war of revival and reformation and world evangelization and social justice and cultural engagement. Though they are deeply interwoven, the first three chapters are more inward, and the last three are more outward. And the one in the middle is a crossover chapter because longing and fasting for the coming of Christ is intensely personal but demands global engagement until he comes.

Why I Wrote This Book

My aim and my prayer in writing this book is that it might awaken a hunger for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. Fasting proves the presence, and fans the flame, of that hunger. It is an intensifier of spiritual desire. It is a faithful enemy of fatal bondage to innocent things. It is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence: "This much, O God, I long for you and for the manifestation of your glory in the world!"

One might think that those who feast most often on communion with God are least hungry. They turn often from the innocent pleasures of the world to linger more directly in the presence of God through the revelation of his Word. And there they eat the Bread of Heaven and drink the Living Water by meditation and faith. But, paradoxically, it is not so that they are the least hungry saints. The opposite is the case. The strongest, most mature Christians I have ever met are the hungriest for God. It

might seem that those who eat most would be least hungry. But that's not the way it works with an inexhaustible fountain, and an infinite feast, and a glorious Lord.

When you take your stand on the finished work of God in Christ, and begin to drink at the River of Life and eat the Bread of Heaven, and know that you have found the end of all your longings, you only get hungrier for God. The more satisfaction you experience from God, while still in this world, the greater your desire for the next. For, as C. S. Lewis said, "Our best havings are wantings."⁸

The more deeply you walk with Christ, the hungrier you get *for* Christ . . . the more homesick you get for heaven . . . the more you want "all the fullness of God" . . . the more you want to be done with sin . . . the more you want the Bridegroom to come again . . . the more you want the Church revived and purified with the beauty of Jesus . . . the more you want a great awakening to God's reality in the cities . . . the more you want to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ penetrate the darkness of all the unreached peoples of the world . . . the more you want to see false worldviews yield to the force of Truth . . . the more you want to see pain relieved and tears wiped away and death destroyed . . . the more you long for every wrong to be made right and the justice and grace of God to fill the earth like the waters cover the sea.

If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great.⁹ God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and to say with some simple fast: "This much, O God, I want you."