

Go fast and live: Hunger as spiritual discipline

by [Mark Buchanan](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

Recently some huge billboards along British Columbia's major roadways showed black-and-white photos of car wrecks—gashed and mangled metal, clouds of steam and smoke—all illumined under the luridness of fire, flares, searchlights and siren lights. The caption beneath the ads was as stark and grim as the photos: "Speed is killing us. Slow down and live."

If this were a multimedia presentation, I would now flash up a picture of our lives—our mindless and fruitless preoccupations, our depressions and ragings over not getting our way, our ceaseless and insatiable need for more and more and more, our boredom and blaming. And beneath I would put the caption: "Consumption is killing us. Go fast and live."

You can't read very far in any direction in the Bible without realizing that fasting was part of the natural rhythm of life for the people of God. They expected and planned to fast as naturally as they expected and planned to eat. To them, fasting was woven into the rhythm of life like day and night, summer and winter, sowing and reaping, waking and sleeping. There were times you ate and times you fasted. Doesn't everybody live like that? Richard Foster writes:

The list of biblical personages who fasted reads like a "Who's Who" of scriptures: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.

He goes on to name some of the great men and women throughout Christian history who made fasting a discipline. John Wesley refused to ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry who did not fast twice a week. Jesus himself, though he stood against the Pharisees' rigid, self-promoting and judgmental practice of fasting, expects us to fast. "When you fast . . ." he says in Matthew 6:16. When you fast—not if.

Jesus began his ministry by spending 40 days alone, fasting. Mark says that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and at the end of those 40 days the devil came to tempt him. I have always thought that the devil was coming to Jesus at his weakest moment: Jesus gaunt, rawboned, wild-eyed, ready to scavenge any moldy crust of bread or scrape any meat shreds off a lamb's bone. Even pork looks good. The devil's first temptation is to offer Jesus food: turn these stones into bread. I always saw that as attacking Jesus at his lowest, most vulnerable point, tempting him with the very thing he craves most.

But I'm not so sure anymore. The more I learn from fasting the more I see that Jesus actually stood at his strongest when his belly was empty. Jesus is in peak condition, a fighter who has been training hard. When he steps into the ring, his opponent doesn't stand a chance. Jesus's swift and unflinching rebuttal to the devil is to quote from Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God."

How does anyone get to know that this indeed is so? One thing is almost certain: it's hard, maybe impossible, to learn between fistfuls and mouthfuls of food.

The serpent came to Adam in a garden—Adam surrounded by an abundance of delicious food freely given to him, Adam with his belly full—and tempted him and Eve with food: "Here's something you haven't tried. Want some?" And they lick their lips, reach out a grasping hand, take, eat. But the devil comes to Jesus in a desert, Jesus surrounded by stones and scorpions and snakes, Jesus with his belly scoured empty, and the devil tempts him with food: "Wouldn't you like just a slice of bread?" And Jesus flicks him off like a fly.

So who is it who understands—really understands—that we don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God? Who is it who not only understands, but withstands because of it, overcomes on the basis of it?

If you never fast, then the whole concept of being wholly nourished and sustained by God's word will be only a nice, sweet and totally irrelevant idea. You may pay the idea lip service, but you'll be too busy licking sauce off your lips to do any more. And worse: if you never fast, you may not stand when the day of testing and temptation comes.

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Jesus's retort to the devil is a good place to begin:

He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. . . . Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. (Deut. 8:3, 5 NIV)

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert . . . Fasting is not your own idea. It is not a legalistic requirement. It is not a work we perform. It is not a weight-loss technique. It is not a hunger strike. No, it is a God-and-Spirit work—a response to the leading and the driving of the Godhead. Fasting begins in a hunger for more of God's direction in life. Fasting is born of an appetite for more of God's presence, wanting God to lead, wanting the Spirit to drive. And what he often leads us and drives us into is a fast.

Deuteronomy 8 indicates that there are three main purposes behind a God-led and Spirit-driven experience of hunger. God orchestrates and engineers hunger to humble his people, to test them and to teach them. Fasting humbles us because it shows us quickly our limits and our frailty. It shows us our utter dependency—ultimately upon God, but also upon one another. If farmers don't grow crops, if mills don't grind grain, if truckers don't bring it to us, if bakers don't make it into bread, if stores don't stock it fresh and sell it cheap—then I don't eat. I once talked to a university professor who spent some time in the Ukraine. He was tenured, respected and highly paid, but when he lived in the Ukraine, he had to get in food lines like everybody else and wait two or three hours for bread. It humbled him. He realized that all his education and affluence meant nothing in a place where bread was scarce.

It's arrogant for people to sit around tables piled with food and talk about how the poor should become motivated, focused, more like us. Hunger humbles us. It opens our eyes and our guts to our own stark-naked neediness, our own daily dependence: that unless God in his mercy provides food, manna, for this day, we're in trouble. Look at us: we start coming apart after only 12 hours of not eating. We get depressed, cranky, weary. Now tell me again about how poor people should be more like us: strong, dependable, independent. Hunger humbles us.

That's why Jesus rebukes the Pharisees' manner of fasting: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting" (Matt. 6:16 NIV). In other words, the very thing that God intends for their humility they use for self-exaltation. The very thing meant to break their self-indulgence is used to feed it. Rather than an experience of humility, fasting has become an experience of pride.

So it's good when we fast that we feel hungry, weary, weak. When I first began fasting on a regular basis, I tried all sorts of things to avoid the sting and weight of it. But after a while, I came to realize that the discomfort of fasting was God's primary means of humbling me. I can run on my own strength for long stretches. I can forget my limits and become self-reliant, cocksure, swaggering, thinking that apart from me Jesus can do nothing, but that he can do all things through me who gives him strength. Fasting humbles us.

Second, fasting tests what is in our hearts. Fasting brings to the surface that which is deep down, which maybe we can mask from ourselves and others with large doses of corn chips and Barq's root beer. Fasting churns that stuff up from the depths. Is there anger in me? I can usually control that with a hamburger and fries. Am I resentful over something, irritated at someone, overly ambitious in some area, fearful about some matter? I can smother that with a pizza. Am I depressed or embittered, suffering from a sense of life's blandness or unfairness? I can artificially perk myself up with a Mars bar or three.

In *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis writes on the Christian view of sex and sexuality, and says that sex is an appetite, and like all appetites, it should be fed in healthy ways but not titillated, not indulged, not gorged. One sign that our sexual appetites are totally out of bounds is the growing phenomenon—Lewis was writing in the 1940s—of striptease shows. He wrote: "Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theater by simply bringing a covered plate onto the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see . . . that it contained a mutton chop or bit of bacon, would not you think that in that country something had gone wrong in the appetite of food?" I read those words in the mid-'80s, when one of the advertisements frequently on television featured an item of food—I don't remember what—that was unveiled to an audience in exactly the manner Lewis described. Our preoccupation with food has entered the realm of the absurd. Look at any magazine—page after page of succulent, sauce-laden, sugar-sparkling, fat-glistening food. It's a kind of culinary pornography. McDonald's golden arches and Coca-Cola's

logo are more widely recognized symbols than the cross of Christ. Our world's most prevalent iconography enshrines food.

Fasting tests the food obsession, sees if this absurd soul-withering, body-swelling fetish is in our hearts. There is a simple, theological name for this craving: idolatry.

Finally, fasting teaches us that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Hunger makes stark and raw our humanness, or human neediness and fragility. Hunger makes me understand my poverty of soul, poverty of spirit, poverty of ends. Blessed are those, Jesus said, who hunger for righteousness. Admittedly, I don't get around to hungering much after righteousness, apart from the experience of physical hunger. As Cornelius Plantinga observes, gluttony is an appetite suppressant for the things of God. But as I go into the desert place, the place of hunger, and all the junk starts to surface in my heart, I realize that there is only one sure way to deal with that: the word of God. My opinion or your opinion will not cut it. My feelings are not adequate. The only thing big enough, tough enough, true enough to speak to the power of the flesh, the world and the devil is the word of God. Fasting makes me hungry for every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

More and more people are food gluttons and biblical anorexics. Even their intake of scripture has been reduced to a kind of fast-food drive-through thing—nibbling the crumbs tossed from the pulpit on Sunday. “I left that church. They just weren't feeding me.”

When my son was eight, we taught him a discipline. He would come home from school, flop on the couch and yell, “I'm starving!” We showed him that there were certain foods he could help himself to—foods that were good for him, not just tasty. And he was fully capable of getting them himself.

“I'm starving—this church isn't feeding me.” That's maybe a legitimate complaint from a three-year-old. From a grown-up, it's a self-indictment.

Physical hunger is to deepen in us hunger for the word of God and motivate us to get our own food.

Physical hunger also teaches us to feast on Jesus. After Christ feeds the 5,000, he has an instant megachurch. But, in what seems like a case of extreme self-sabotage, he chases all but the most committed away with a few stern words:

You are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures, which the Son of Man will give you. . . . I am the bread of life. . . . Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. . . . For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. (John 6:26-27, 35 NIV)

When our bellies are full, we are in danger of following Jesus for all the wrong reasons. As long as you keep the bread coming, keep serving my appetites, keep meeting my felt needs and not my real needs, I'm part of your church, Lord. True, Christ, in his deep compassion, does want to feed us real bread. But he wants more for us than that: he wants to give us himself. He has the words of eternal life. He is the Holy One of God, he is the bread of life that came down from heaven. The deepest need we have is to eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood.

Ultimately, paradoxically maybe, fasting also teaches us to be like God. Isaiah 58, the Bible's most extensive passage on fasting, is explicit about this. It is God's rebuke to Israel because of the way its people are fasting. Fasting has not changed their exploitative habits, their bullying and grasping, their meanness and me-ism.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away
from your own flesh and blood?
(Isa. 58:6-7 NIV)

The fast God chooses teaches us to have God's heart for the hungry, the oppressed, the naked, the homeless. When we taste a little brokenness ourselves, we have a greater sense of urgency to repair for others what is broken. Fasting is meant to scour our gut. It is God's intent that we feel the pangs of hunger, the gnawing emptiness, the dizziness and weariness. That's how a third of the world lives. And if

we never live that way, even briefly, how will we learn to care for the least of these? Without hunger, our consumption will lead us deeper and deeper into acts of oblivious or intentional neglect, abuse, exploitation of those who are hungry. Fasting gives us a small taste of what their world is like, a taste we will never get if we do not for a time forsake the taste of food.

I have a friend who organized a dinner at his church to raise money for famine relief in Sudan. About 80 people signed up to come. He had tables set for various-sized groups—as small as six, as large as 15. People came in and took seats at random. Then the servers came out. The smallest tables were served first. They received an abundance of rich, sauce-laden food, hot, tender, tasty. The servers were polite, attentive, quick to bring more food at the slightest indication that it was running low. They were quick to do the guests' bidding, and usually anticipated their wishes.

Next, some of the larger tables were served. Theirs was a sparse, messy, bland meal. The few dishes were brought out in no particular order. The servers were curt and hurried. There were no seconds.

Two of the largest tables were served second to last—after the few guests at the first tables had already had all they could eat and their dinner plates, piled with uneaten food, were whisked away and replaced with rich desserts and coffee. At the large tables, the servers plunked down, with rude haste, one bowl of rice in the middle of each table. No one got a plate or bowl. There were no utensils for serving or eating. The waiters never came back.

The very largest table was served last of all. They got a bucket of water. There was barely enough to go around. The water was brown and lukewarm. If you wanted some, you had to drink it from a wooden ladle, passed along with the bucket. Most people didn't bother.

At first the people at the largest tables, the last ones served, complained. Several people got up and spoke to the servers. The servers ignored them. Some went to my friend, the organizer. He ignored them. He and the servers paid attention only to the guests who sat at the smallest tables and who had received the most. The servers would come around often to those tables, ask if everything was pleasing and agreeable, and did they need anything else? There was much laughter, banter, politeness.

After a while, it became obvious to everyone what was happening. The church was being given a taste of how the world works—its lopsidedness, its patchy rhythm of muchness and emptiness, of affluence and desolation. Some got to experience, and all got to witness, the hunger of the hungry.

The offering for famine relief was good that night.

God has chosen to teach us to care in a practical way for the oppressed, the homeless, the ones with empty bellies. We are to allow the gnawing in our own guts to break our hearts, and the breaking of our hearts to lead us to break others' yokes and repair walls.

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