

THOUGHTS ON FASTING

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The originating idea behind fasting may have come from the observation that when we are consumed with something important we may forget to eat (hunger). A similar thing can happen when we are working on some project and forget how late at night it has gotten (sleep). We tend to push ourselves beyond usual stamina when we are caught up in something important or interesting (energy use). Paul observes a similar thing about marital relations in 1 Corinthians 1.

Fasting is a practical way of exercising the will; it exerts itself by overriding one of the physical drives. It gives us the sense of making the spiritual/mental/volitional/affective dimension superior to the physical ones. It is a practical way of affirming the priority of the spiritual over the physical (not a negating or denial of the physical, however). It affirms the transcendence of the spiritual dimension. Temporarily setting aside this physical need reinforces the intent of focusing on the non-physical dimension. Fasting breaks the cycle of physical dependency.

It has a way of clearing the mind or sharpening it by setting aside physical distractions.

Fasting also sharpens taste. After a period of self-deprivation, food tastes especially good.

Of course, fasting is not for drawing attention to oneself (Matthew 9). If it is done for that reason, it is aiming in the wrong direction, and some of the results that are otherwise possible through it are forfeit.

It may be possible to use fasting as a control on hunger. After about three days, we do not get progressively hungrier. Skipping a meal may help control weigh gain. Not eating for a day or so may be a way of getting started on a diet.

Fasting may involve simply skipping one meal. When the Pharisee prayed in the temple, he said that he fasted twice a week. Such fasting would not be three-day affairs. Jesus' temptation experience, however, illustrates a quite lengthy fast (cp. Moses on Mt. Sinai and Elijah in the Negev).

Fasting may not be a good option for people with certain health conditions like hypoglycemia or diabetes.