

Lent as a Season of Responsive Fasting

BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

Fasting in the Bible is almost always focused on a grievous condition. Fasting is a response to something instead of a means to something else. Lenten fasting, then, is a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life.

Lent cuts against the grain of American culture. Lent is preparation for confession, forgiveness, and the absolution of sins. One could say the entire season of Lent is embodied confession of our sins as we prepare for the great gospel weekend of cross and resurrection. If that is the case, Lent cuts against the grain of American Christian culture as much as culture in general. We are a happy culture, or at least we feel entitled to happiness. We are also a consumerist culture, and we feel entitled to have the latest—from iPhones and iPads to cars and guns and shoes and fresh organic food and pizza and BBQ. We are also a pragmatic culture since we think there is a technological means to nearly everything we want, from healthcare to safety on our roads to spiritual formation.

I'd like to camp on that comment about spiritual formation. There is an industry of conferences, retreats, resources, blogs, websites, and books about *how* to get spiritually formed. No one seems to think it takes a lifetime of small choices and gentle nods of the soul and disciplines. Instead, we want to know how and we want to know how right now. And we want guarantees that if we do Y we will inevitably get to Z. The sooner the better, so we can move on to the next thing to consume. I am reminded of that great classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, where we learn that the way to learn to pray is to pray—for a long time. We learn spirituality in the ordinary grind of daily communion with God, not in the tricks of the game.

Lent cuts against these raw and rambunctious grains in our culture because Lent is connected to a discipline called fasting. Yet, somehow our culture has given rise to a theory of fasting that makes it an *instrument* for spiritual growth leading to the oddity that fasting sits quite well in a culture that does not spend much time thinking about national and corporate or individual sins, that does not go to church to experience grace and forgiveness at the Lord's Table, and that does not see Eucharist as the aim of worship. Lent and fasting belong together, but they are often separate in our culture.

INSTRUMENTAL FASTING

I spent one summer reading a number of well-known books about fasting and came to the conclusion that the vast majority of them sell fasting by promising results. In other words, fasting is the instrument or the means by which we acquire what we are after. Let's call what we are after the benefits, and I shall call the inflation of benefits, or at least the increasing list of items one is promised by fasting, "benefititis."¹ How so?

To begin with, fasting is now tied to the American fetish with *foods and diet*. To be sure, Americans are overweight in global comparison; they are also keenly aware of calories and cholesterol; and restriction of calories and disciplined eating make a person more healthy. Since the prophet Daniel chose not to eat delicacies and the foods of the wealthy some believe God's original intent in fasting, at least in part, was so we would learn to purge the body of bad foods in order to regain a proper dietary and chemical balance. Here is what Daniel said:

At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks.

Daniel 10:2-3

The simple fact is that "fasting" was reserved for the choice not to eat *any* food or drink, or at least any food, so technically this "Daniel fast" is not a fast but an act of abstinence. There is a context, of course, having to do with the king mocking the Jewish holidays and so Daniel's choice not to eat delicacies is an act of solidarity with his people and an expression of grief over Israel's/Jerusalem's condition. But the last thing on Daniel's mind was his health. Many Christians have laid aside Daniel's historical context and have discovered that the choice of not eating dainty foods and not indulging ourselves is the path to health. This insight, though accurate, has nothing to do with Daniel. This is the only text in the Bible to my knowledge that is used to support fasting as a form of dieting. If we see Daniel for what it was, we are led to the conclusion that fasting and dieting have nothing in common. The Bible's sense of fasting was not about health.

I cannot mention fasting and dieting without warning each of us to be careful about urging folks to fast. Bulimia, anorexia and other food disorders

are on the rise and restriction of diet can easily slide into a food disorder. In my years of teaching college students I know at least one of my students died of anorexia nervosa, and we had a neighbor whose daughter died of the same. Severe and rigorous dieting complicates the body's health even if a person looks healthy and has lost excessive weight. My doctor told me he can think of no good thing that comes from fasting beyond twenty-four hours and a former colleague, who was also an M.D., said nearly the same thing to me.

A second form of instrumental fasting is contending that if we fast we will become more *intimate with God* on our own terms. At Mount Sinai, Moses, after all, fasted forty days and saw God; perhaps fasting had something to do with it. One is tempted to say that if fasting had anything to do with seeing God, the vision of God for Moses was a hallucination. Here is a biblical fact: at no place in the Bible does it say we are to fast in order to increase our intimacy with God. Of course, one feels lighter and sometimes that sensation is understood as intimacy with God but, as my medical doctor said to me, "lightness" is a sensation caused by a chemical reaction in the brain and it is far from health or intimacy with God. Promising the feeling of intimacy with God as a result of fasting is irresponsible Christian teaching. (I will say more about this below.)

Another instance of the instrumental theory of fasting, which emphasizes fasting as a means to get something, is connected to *evangelism*. Some are overcome by the burden of folks who are lost or who live away from God or who have not found the joy of knowing God – however one wants to define the benefit of salvation – and this prompts them to fast in their prayers for those who are outside the fold. The language I have used above to

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describe evangelistic fasting comes closer to the biblical model of fasting, which I will explain below, but for now I want to argue that not only is fasting for lost souls not found in the Bible but it runs the risk of becoming an unconscious or conscious manipulative device. That is, some think if we fast we can trigger the work of the Spirit of God in another person. I want to call our attention at this juncture to this dimension of evangelistic fashion: the moment it becomes a technique or a strategy or a tactic or a technology, it has ceased being what biblical fasting is all about.

This particular form of instrumental fasting can now be expanded to a fourth: *fasting and intercessory prayer*. From the time my Christian faith came alive—back in the 70s—I have had friends who have ramped up their intercessions with fasting. Here is what I mean: prayer seems not to be good enough; the most intense form of prayer is prayer born of fasting. Fasting here is understood either as a demonstration before God of our deepest seriousness and intensity or it is understood as the divine means of strengthening our prayers. There are books that make the claim that if we are not getting answers to our prayers, then we need to consider (and it often moves from “consider” to “command”) fasting. Fasting, therefore, becomes the means of getting our prayers answered.

RESPONSIVE FASTING

For years I taught a Bible survey class and we routinely came upon fasting passages in the Bible—from David and Daniel to Jesus and Paul. There was in me a profound sense of dissatisfaction when each of these instances provoked conversation in my students about what fasting was, and I found to a person that fasting was understood instrumentally. One time a student regaled us with a story about a prayer meeting that led to a week of fasting over the need to exorcise a demon from someone, and he attributed the successful exorcism to the ramping of their prayers with fasting. Time and time again I’ve had friends tell me their intimacy with God was increased when they fasted, and many in fact call “fasting” a spiritual discipline. And spiritual disciplines are understood across the board as the divinely-ordained means of spiritual growth.

I sense a curmudgeonliness coming on. Fine, I say to myself, I’m glad someone is liberated from demonic assault; and I’m happy to hear of my brothers and sisters growing in their intimacy with God and of their spiritual formation. But I’m a Bible guy and I don’t see any of this in the Bible. Perhaps it was a part of the well-established Jewish custom of fasting twice a week, but frankly I’ve read every text I’ve ever seen referenced about Jewish fasting and I’ve not seen one ancient text that ever suggested that fasting led to greater intimacy with God. So it is very hard to establish that the twice-a-week fasting practice of Jesus’ contemporaries was a “spiritual discipline” for spiritual growth.

When I was teaching Bible survey and we came upon passages where fasting was present I paid attention to the factors at work and this is what I learned. Fasting in the Bible is either entirely, or at least almost always, *focused on a grievous condition*. Put differently, fasting is a *response* to something instead of a *means* to something else. Here is my schematic to explain it:

A → B → C

A is the grievous condition.

B is the act of fasting.

C is the result or benefit.

The Bible’s focus is not B leads to C, but B responds to A. So, perhaps this is the Bible’s most accurate fasting schematic:

A ← B, sometimes leading, but not all that often, to C.

But what is this “grievous” condition. The term refers to severe and serious and tragic conditions. In the Bible the grievous condition prompting the response of fasting is almost always connected to death, or the threat of death. Hence, war or tragedy or the threat of war or calamity or capture, but especially sin and its consequences – these are the precipitants of fasting in the Bible. Of course, the Bible’s characters who fast are turning their face toward God and often in petition to ward off the threat of death, but the focus in the Bible is that fasting is a response not a means. And it surely isn’t a common means of the well-to-do or comfortable for their inner development. (Do we realize the social condition of some of our spirituality?)

I want now to add another factor to the mix before we get to Lenten fasting as responsive preparation. One of my favorite writers is Abraham Joshua Heschel, and his book *The Prophets* is my all-time favorite writing of his (with *Sabbath* running in second place).² One of the themes developed in *The Prophets*, and Heschel’s the master of evocative thematic repetition, is the notion of divine pathos. In summary, divine pathos is the condition of a prophet who catches a glimpse of the divine disposition toward Israel or some leader in Israel. The prophet’s calling is to enter into that divine pathos – wrath, grief, sorrow, threat, promise, healing, love, or grace – and embody the divine pathos.

Hosea’s famous entering into relations with a prostitute was how Hosea entered into the divine pathos of YHWH’s complicated scorned-lover relation with Israel. I want to suggest that fasting is entering into participation in the divine pathos over death and sin in Israel and Judah, and therefore also in the Church and our culture.

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LENTEN FASTING

Here is my proposal for us to enhance our Lenten theology and at the same time to enhance our Lenten experience. (The irony of suggesting instrumentality!) My suggestion is that we learn to see Lenten fasting as a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life, and that we also learn to see fasting as entering into the divine pathos about sin and death.

First, let us get some biblical texts on the table to see how fasting is responsive. In the middle of Psalm 35, we read this from David:

Malicious witnesses rise up;
they ask me about things I do not know.
They repay me evil for good;
my soul is forlorn.
*But as for me, when they were sick,
I wore sackcloth;
I afflicted myself with fasting.
I prayed with head bowed on my bosom,
as though I grieved for a friend or a brother;
I went about as one who laments for a mother,
bowed down and in mourning.*

Psalm 35:11-14 (italics added)

Without an extensive commentary on context, we simply observe that David's fasting here is in response to the sickness of his enemies, those for whom David grieves and prays and intercedes for health; but the fundamental point is that David is less concerned with fasting as an intensification of his prayers than with fasting as an expression of the depth of his grief over the threat of death. Let us never forget that ordinary sicknesses and death were tied closer together in the ancient world than in ours.

The famous passage in Isaiah 58 about fasting is neither an example of a spiritual discipline leading to formation nor an intensification of intercession. It is the fast in response to the poverty of others that spurs the fasters to use their resources for the good of others. And the standard fast of Israel's history was on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32; cf. 16:2-34; Numbers 29:7-11). On that day the Israelites were to "deny yourselves" (or "afflict yourselves"), and time revealed that this was understood as denying oneself the normal pleasures of life—food, comfortable bedding, sexual intercourse, and washing one's body. Why? Because they were to face their sins, prepare themselves to confess their sins, and to present themselves as genuinely ready to receive the blessings of forgiveness.

Lent not only cuts against the grain of American culture, it cuts against the grain of personal spiritualities of all sorts, especially those typical in the West. Without wanting to suggest our gospel or our theology are morbidly fascinated with sin and death, and without denying that the gospel tells a story that leads us through the cross into the resurrection, at the core of the Christian gospel is the forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Lent reminds us where we were, who we were, what we were doing and have done, and teaches us to tell the truth about ourselves—that as image-bearers of God we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, in what we have done and in what we have left undone, in not loving God and ourselves and our neighbors as ourselves—and to turn to God for mercy. This is not a morbid voyeurism into our previous sins, but a candid recognition of our past and the reality of current sins.

As a truth-telling time, Lent is also a time when we turn toward the cross on which Christ died. Atonement theories abound and debates are currently raging across the theological spectrum, but what we confess as Christians during the Lenten season is that as sinners we turn to the one who died “for our sins.” Without denying the intensity or the importance of the various metaphors of atonement, we can learn that Christ died *with* us—in that he completely identified with us in our humanity all the way to our death (Philippians 2:5-11), that Christ died *instead of us*—in that he took upon himself the guilt and punishment and death of our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21), and *for us*—in that his death brings us the forgiveness of sins (Romans 4:25). We fast and afflict ourselves, or deny ourselves, in response to our life of sin and sinning. We embody then our conviction that our sins entangle us in death.

So we face ourselves before God and repent as we contemplate our own sinfulness. And let us not withdraw from the world in contemplating only our own sins. As Isaiah told his audience that genuine fasting was care for the poor, so in our day: genuine Lenten truth-telling is the story of complicity, of systemic injustices in the United States, in the Western World, and in the stories of those around the globe, and of unrealized participation in evils that affect us all, like consumerism and individualism. Lenten fasting is the proper response to our culture’s complicity in death-dealing systemic injustices.

But in facing ourselves before God, who pronounces death on sin, we know the cross is coming, and we know the resurrection is coming, and we know the ascension and exaltation of our Lord are coming, and we turn toward the gospel’s comic ending—that sin can be unraveled, that death can be overturned, that disease and the infections of sin can be healed, and they can be healed because we see the Crucified One break the curse of sin and death on Easter morning in the glories of the resurrection. And we see that same Crucified and Raised One ascend to the right hand of the Father where he reigns until all enemies have been put under his foot.

NOTES

1 This has been written up in my book *Fasting* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

2 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).



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