



## **A PLACE OF EMPTINESS**

This week, we're going to think about a topic that would surely be Garfield the Cat's worst nightmare – we're going to think about fasting.

So, let's kick things off with a stat. According to social media sites across the web, these are the top 10 most common things people are 'fasting' from during Lent this year:

- 10) Binge-watching
- 9) Desserts (as opposed to deserts)
- 8) Fast foods
- 7) Alcohol
- 6) Chocolate
- 5) Hitting snooze
- 4) Shopping
- 3) Swearing
- 2) Social media (kind of ironic)
- 1) Coffee!

Now I don't want to knock this list, but you could do all of the above and still not get the whole Lent / fasting thing. What's it all about, then?

## **Exodus 34:27-28; 1 Kings 19:7-8; Luke 4:1-2**

Moses. Elijah. Jesus.

What do these 3 individuals have in common? They are the only people in the whole of human history to have fasted from food and water for 40 days and 40 nights (which is a miraculous feat by the way, so don't try this at home):

- **Moses** (receiving the *Torah* on Mount Sinai).
- **Elijah** (fleeing from King Ahab of Israel).
- **Jesus** (being tested in the desert of Judea).

And that's one of the reasons for Jesus' time in the desert - He is aligning Himself with the other great deliverers of Israelite history, in that all 3 individuals came to set God's people free (although you could probably argue Moses and Elijah were really preparing the way for Jesus, as types of the greatest deliverer of them all).

However, it would be wrong to think that this has nothing to say to ordinary people like you and me, because the idea of fasting is there throughout the whole Bible (yes, even in the NT. I've known people who have struggled with this one, but it's true).

So, what is it about fasting? It's one thing to end up having 'nil by mouth' – but to do it to yourself? What is the point of this crazy act of self-denial?

**1) Fasting Resets Our Priorities.** Saying 'no' to the essentials reminds us that it's the simple things in life that really matter. And that's an important lesson to learn, especially for those of us in the developed world, where "luxuries are necessities" (if you've had experience of the developing world, you'll know it's the other way round). At the same time, we should never see fasting or Lent as some kind of self-improvement program, or a 'New Year's Resolution' mk2. Whenever people abstain from food and drink in the Bible, it is primarily about drawing closer to God. And when Christians fast, it is about identifying with the One who chose to identify Himself, with us.

**2) Fasting Reconnects Our Hearts.** Think 'fasting' and you probably think 'grumbling stomach', but in reality, it's about more than just food. It's about making God centre of attention – by taking time to talk to Him and listen to Him. So, for some of us, abstaining from *other* things for a while may be just as helpful, e.g. TV or internet-use. Or even sex, if you're married (and if you're not, you shouldn't be doing it anyway). Does the Bible say such things? Absolutely, it does (check out 1 Corinthians 7)! But whatever we choose to abstain from (and these are just suggestions), the important thing here is to log on to Jesus – as individuals, as couples, as a community.

**3) Fasting Reinforces Our Prayers.** It's a way of telling God, "This matters to me. I mean business about this." Now that doesn't mean you can twist God's arm or make Him do what you want just by skipping a meal. That's not the way it works, and that viewpoint has more in common with paganism than Judeo-Christianity. God will not be manipulated – He's God,

after all. But fasting is a statement, to God but also to ourselves – a reminder that prayer is not just what we say, it's what we do. And as the adage goes, actions speak louder than words – because words are cheap, and prayers can be too, when we use them as an excuse for doing absolutely nothing.

**4) Fasting Rewards Our Endeavours.** It can affect our lifestyles (by putting prayer in place of mealtimes), but it can also affect the world in which we live. Because when we fast and pray, we see breakthroughs. Sometimes that may be a significant turn-around in a particular person or situation; sometimes it may just be a turn-around in us (and that may be significant enough!). But when we fast, if we do it properly, something happens (which is exactly what Jesus says in Matthew 6: "And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"). If nothing else, it helps us see things as He does. We are synchronising ourselves with the King of the universe.

So, fasting should be an important part of the Christian life, and as long as we're healthy, there should be no harm in abstaining from food for a day or 2 (or even 3).

### **Emptiness ... Or Fullness?**

But ... there is something else Jesus is doing, wasting away in that desert for 40 days. Because this is bigger than *Lent* or *Yom Kippor* or *Ramadan*. Jesus is saying: "My life is not My own" (in fact, I think He would have been willing to starve to death, had it been the Father's will). "I surrender all." To use Poker-speak, He is 'all-in.'

What would that look like for us? What impact would it have on ...

Our finances?

Our schedules?

Our lifestyles?

Our decisions?

Our abilities?

Our relationships?

It'll look different for each of us, of course. But as we empty ourselves, God begins to fill us with more of Him. So how much are we willing to surrender? Or to put it another way:

How much of God do we really want?