

Sabbatical Journey, Week 5

Hunger for God

News Flash: don't blow this off before you get started!

This week we will tackle another angle on rest. Because it doesn't happen easily or automatically, sometimes (often?) – it's good along the way to cultivate some habits that help our pursuit. These are active, initiating, making a choice to do something different for a specific purpose. We've already been doing some of that, but this takes it to a different level. Our challenge this week involves giving up something specific to help capture our focus.

The Bible calls one application of this fasting. I'm not advocating you stop all of anything here, particularly food. Food is often the focus of fasting because it is so much a part of our day. We feel it viscerally so we think about it often. It also takes time to prepare and eat, so it readily frees up time to invest in another way. However, we can do the same with things that are a regular part of our life that we don't eat (like media, social media, a hobby or regular activity, etc.).

Here is the genius of fasting (as I see it): It's eliminating a particular hunger so we can redirect the feeling of hunger to something else – in this case, to a hunger for God and the pursuit of relationship with Him and rest in Him.

Here are some verses where fasting appears. Read them and consider: what is the point of fasting here? What attitudes and actions are associated with fasting? Why?

Nehemiah 1:4 and 9:1

Esther 4:3

Psalms 35:13

Daniel 9:3

Mark 2:18-20

Acts 13:2 and 14:23

The Bible warns against legalistic practices that undermine our freedom in Christ, lead to spiritual pride, and become an end in themselves (e.g., 1 Tim 4:1-3, Col 2:20-21, 1 Cor 8:8, Mt 6:16-18).

What specifics do these passages indicate we need to guard against?

Somewhere between the dangers of self-indulgence and self-denial is a path that helps us identify our hungers, our appetites, and leads us to keep them focused upon God. That's the path we want to find.

My challenge for this week is to choose something that you like, and that calls for your time and attention, and use those desires and the time you would give them for some pursuit of

God. (For many, food may be a bad idea because of health reasons. It could be a hobby, something you do on your computer, social media, TV, the constant checking of your cell phone, etc.) I encourage you to work your way through the passages and questions below, then make your choice.

Read Matthew 6:16-18. What do you notice that Jesus condones and condemns with regard to fasting? Think about how that will help you this week to embrace some kind of fast.

How can self-denial effectively cultivate the desires and actions we want?

One of Satan's great tools to keep us off track is to create hungers that compel our time and attention that are not evil. They just keep us from better things, including a growing hunger for God. How have you noticed this in your life?

Many view fasting as a negative thing to be endured rather than a positive help to achieve a heart passion for fellowship with God. How can you keep a positive approach in this? (See Philippians 3:8 and related passages.)

Think about the following statement from John Piper. What stands out to you? How does it help you positively approach the idea of a fast?

“This is the essence of Christian fasting; We ache and yearn – and fast – to know more and more of all that God is for us in Jesus. But only because He has already laid hold of us and is drawing us ever forward and upward into ‘all the fullness of God.’”

Now it's time to pick your opportunity. Write it down. Share it with someone who can be your cheerleader and encourager. Start small, then see if you can make it grow.

Keep some notes of your journey – both the delights and the struggles.

What understanding do they give you?

How can you use them to keep cultivating hunger for God?

Think about the following statement and seek to embrace it in this exercise of “fasting.” Fasting never denies the goodness of the gift God has given. Rather, it is a choice to set aside the gift temporarily for the purpose of reveling and rejoicing in the giver. Its aim is not upon the loss of the gift, but to give the gift of my heart, mind and desire to the One who so generously gives to me.