

Fast

MATTHEW 4:1-4; 6:16-18; ACTS 13:2-3

GOAL

Adults explore biblical models for fasting to draw closer to God and consider fasting for justice and transformation.

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



Visit our YouTube channel, bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR, for conversation starter videos.

PRAYER

Holy God, your people hunger for connection with you. May my preparation for this session on fasting point them to your bread and sustenance. Amen.

THIS SESSION

Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community, or nation.¹ Christian fasting is voluntary, chosen by the individual or group. Fasting is for a specific time: part of a day, a whole day, a few days, a week, or up to forty days. Denying ourselves something long-term is a lifestyle, not a fast.

The spiritual purpose for fasting draws on biblical patterns. Christians fast for repentance, to clarify and intensify their prayers, to ask God for guidance, to purify their hearts before God and ask God to continue that process of purification, or to free up money or other resources to give to people who are poor or to Christ's mission. Fasting in the Bible almost always has a component of prayer, and Christians who fast from food or other aspects of daily life report that fasting intensifies and focuses their prayers.

THE BIBLE STORY

Following his baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and nights. Matthew 4:1-4 tells of the tempter encouraging Jesus to use his power to make stones into bread to feed himself. Jesus responded that people do not live by bread alone, suggesting that God's word alone is necessary for life.

In Matthew's recording of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus includes instructions to his listeners about fasting. "Whenever you fast," Jesus says, "do not look dismal" (Matthew 6:16-18).

Acts 13 tells of fasting in the early church. In Antioch, while the Christians there were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to the people, telling them to consecrate Paul and Barnabas for the ministry of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2-3). The people's fast, along with prayer, allowed for drawing near to God before sending out.

SESSION PREPARATION

Depending on the options you choose:

- "Fasting Together" (p. 7): Preview the website links in the box on page 15 in the *Adult Reflection Guide* for suggestions and activities of groups who engage in fasting with others for justice.

1. Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom beyond Our Appetites* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 16.

GETTING STARTED

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome participants and allow time for gathering activities (introductions, offering, prayer concerns, and announcements). Review the “Summary of the Practice” found in the Unit Overview (p. 3). Explain that a more detailed discussion of the practice can be found in the foundational essay that begins on page 68 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Distribute the guide and encourage participants to read the essay during the course of the next six sessions.

OPENING RITUAL

Refer to “Introducing the Practice” in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 7). Lead participants in the responsive Opening Ritual.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or more options.

CONVERSATION STARTER VIDEOS

Show the “*Practice Spiritual Disciplines Practice Overview*” video and the “*Practice Spiritual Disciplines Session 1*” video from the Growing Faith Resources YouTube channel (bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR). Lead a brief conversation about participants’ thoughts and questions the videos prompt as you introduce the session.

APPROACHING GOD

Refer to the circles in the Unit Overview in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 5). Have participants read and respond to the questions on the page. Discuss the questions together.

- ➔ What, if any, spiritual practice would you feel most comfortable doing?
- ➔ Thinking of spiritual practices as ways we draw near to God, what are ways you have approached God in your life?
- ➔ Is there a time when God approached you? Describe that experience.

EATING AND DRINKING

Refer to the plate in “Introducing the Practice” in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 7). Have participants follow the instructions for drawing and reflecting on recent experiences of eating and drinking. Invite people to talk about their responses. Ask:

- ➔ What do you learn about your meal habits by reflecting on them?
- ➔ What changes in your behavior do you expect by being more intentional about your eating and drinking?
- ➔ What roles do attention and intention play in eating? In fasting?

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Choose one or more options.

JESUS AND FASTING

Refer to “Jesus and Fasting” in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 8). Read aloud the first paragraph in the section. Invite volunteers to read aloud the texts from Matthew 4:1–4 and Matthew 6:16–18 (p. 9) while the others notice what stands out for them in the verses. Have participants share their

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- This and all sessions require that the leader and participants have their copy of the *Adult Reflection Guide* with them.

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- Internet-connected device

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- Pens

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- Pens

thoughts. Use the questions on page 9 for group discussion. Conclude by asking:

- ➔ What do these messages from Jesus say to you about the spiritual discipline of fasting?

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FORTY DAYS OF WILDERNESS

Whether or not you use this study during the liturgical season of Lent, Simon Smith's visual interpretation of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness provides a way to slow down and meditate on just how long Jesus fasted and how he might have felt as he fasted. Show the YouTube video "40 – A Video of Jesus in the Wilderness" (bit.ly/FMJesusWilderness, 4:05). Discuss:

- ➔ What emotions do you see in Jesus over the forty days?
- ➔ What and who does Jesus interact with? What is significant about these interactions?
- ➔ How does the artist portray the effect of fasting on Jesus?
- ➔ How does Jesus' fasting help him draw closer to God?

FASTING IN ACTS

Refer to "Fasting in Acts" in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 10). Summarize information in the first paragraph of this section. Invite a volunteer to read aloud the text from Acts 13:2–3. Discuss the question that follows. Another volunteer reads aloud Acts 14:21–23. Discuss the question on the page. Conclude by asking:

- ➔ Have you or your faith community engaged in fasting to prepare for or engage in God's work? When and for what work?
- ➔ What effect did you notice from the fasting?
- ➔ How might you introduce or encourage your faith community to the spiritual discipline of fasting?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Choose one or more options.

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- Internet-connected devices (smartphones)
 Pens

CHRISTIAN FASTING

In recent years, forms of fasting have caught on in the wider culture. Have participants use smartphones to do an internet search on *fasting*. Invite volunteers to tell the group about various results of their searches. Ask:

- ➔ What impression do you come away with regarding fasting in our current culture?

Refer to "Finding the Practice Then and Now" in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 11). Distribute pens. Have participants read the final paragraph in this section and mark the reasons for Christian fasting that resonate for them. Compare participants' responses with their impressions of fasting in current culture. Ask:

- ➔ What makes a fast uniquely Christian?
- ➔ How might forms of fasting found in the wider culture inform your practice of Christian fasting?

LENT IN THREE MINUTES

Fasting is often talked about during the season of Lent. Show the YouTube video “Lent in 3 Minutes” (bit.ly/FMLentInThreeMinutes, 3:00) to learn about three traditional Lenten practices of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Discuss:

- ➔ What new insights did you gain about the liturgical season of Lent?
- ➔ What is the purpose of fasting during this season?
- ➔ Why might a person decide to practice or not practice fasting?
- ➔ How does this information inform your observation of Lent?

FASTING TOGETHER

In recent years, people across the United States and North America have engaged in marches, protests, fasts, and signature campaigns to raise their voices against a variety of injustices. Bishop William J. Barber II and the Poor People’s Campaign is one of many groups to organize fasts to unify people in a common message.

Use an internet-connected device to read about the Poor People’s Campaign fasting initiative at bit.ly/FMFasting.

Discuss:

- ➔ What was the intended impact of the campaign’s fast?
- ➔ Why was it of value to have many people fasting together?
- ➔ How was this fasting initiative an act of faith?
- ➔ Is this a fasting activity you might be likely to join? Why or why not?

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or more options.

FASTING FOR JUSTICE

Refer to “Fasting for Justice” in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 13). Read aloud the first paragraph in this section. Have participants work individually to read Isaiah 58:5–8 and underline the words and phrases that stand out to them. Discuss what participants found significant in these verses. Brainstorm ways to fast to show solidarity with people who are hungry, homeless, or face other injustices. Encourage them to identify fasting activities beyond abstaining from food. Ask:

- ➔ How could these activities affect those who face injustices?
- ➔ Which of these activities are you likely to participate in?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF FASTING

Refer to the quotation about fasting from Augustine of Hippo in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 12). Read the quotation aloud. Invite participants to respond to Augustine’s wisdom. Discuss:

- Imagine the situation Augustine may have encountered that influenced him to make this statement.
- ➔ What situations might arise today to which this statement may apply?
- ➔ What experiences have you had with personal fasting?
- ➔ How did these experiences deepen your faith, bring you closer to God, or transform you?

Internet-connected device

Internet-connected device



Teaching Tip: Preview the website links in the box on page 15 in the *Adult Reflection Guide* for suggestions and activities of groups who engage in fasting with others for justice.

Pens

PLANNING A FAST

Refer to “Planning a Fast” in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 14). Invite a volunteer to read aloud the first two paragraphs in this section. Have participants work individually to identify activities and items that take up space and time in their lives and list them in their *Adult Reflection Guide*. Invite participants to discuss what they identify as they feel comfortable in sharing. They may gain ideas from one another.

Tell participants to continue reading the instructions on page 14 toward planning a personal fast. Refer them to the “Other suggestions” list on page 15 for additional ways to fast.

Invite volunteers to tell about their experience with this activity or the fast they plan for themselves. At the beginning of the next session, there will be opportunity to check in on each individual’s practices of fasting.

FOLLOWING JESUS

CLOSING VIDEO AND PRAYER

Invite participants to enter into a time of silence. Show the YouTube video “Isaiah 58 (feat. Amena Brown)” (bit.ly/FMIsaiah58, 2:29).

In closing, use the table grace from Latin America. Refer to “Filling Your Plate” in the *Adult Reflection Guide* (p. 15) printed again here:

“O God, to those who hunger give bread; and to us who have bread, give the hunger for justice. Amen.”¹

1. Web Editors, “Prayer of the Day: Latin American Prayer,” *Sojourners*, February 6, 2012, sojo.net/articles/prayer-day-latin-american-prayer.