

The Practice of Fasting

a sermon in the series
The Apprentice: An Analysis of What it Means to be a Disciple

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, August 10, 2014
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.

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Matthew 4:2

And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.

Together we are learning what manner of life Jesus lived because He intended for us to emulate, follow, and model His life to others. This simple text serves us by telling us that Jesus fasted. We don't have too many instances in Scripture where Jesus fasted; it wasn't a huge part of His devotion to God. But we do know that He did on this occasion and that He occasionally fasted from sleep to spend all night in prayer and He fasted the lunch meal the day He was talking to the Samaritan. So regardless of how many times Jesus practiced fasting we know He did it. Fasting is a tool used not only by Jesus but also by His apostles and it helps us unplug from the world and plug into the power of God.

Fasting is the most difficult of all spiritual disciplines followed by solitude, which we talked about last week. The two often work together because Jesus commanded that when we fast to do it privately. There is a biblically sanctioned corporate fast, which we will discuss, but for the most part fasting is an individual practice.

I. Fasting Explained

Before discussing what fasting is, let me share with you two wrong notions about fasting.

A. Wrong Ideas About Fasting.

Some people say fasting should be completely avoided because it's legalistic, a form of self-denial in which you are trying to manipulate God and earn some kind of favor from Him. That's true, if you fast for the purpose of trying to earn something from God it's a form of legalism and ought to be avoided in that case. But it is wrong to believe that you can earn anything from God. You can turn anything into a legalistic act, even church attendance. You might believe because you're here that it is somehow going to earn you some kind of favor or acceptance from God. Not at all. All that God gives He gives as a gift of grace—undeserved favor. Fasting has nothing to do with legalism.

Some people fast so their prayers will be answered. “If I fast, God will see that I’m serious about this issue and it will be more persuasive to Him.” Let me just simply say that is a form of spiritual bribery. You’re saying you can manipulate and obligate Him and it is a wrong and completely unbiblical purpose for fasting. God will not give you something because you check something off some list. We live by faith through grace.

Another wrong notion of fasting is that fasting is something that the very spiritual do. The superstars of the faith are the ones that fast. They are given to that because they’re spiritually mature, but for we who are not so spiritually mature it’s unnecessary for us.

It’s not necessary for salvation or being rightly related to Jesus, but the idea that this is only reserved for the spiritually few is absolutely wrong and here is why. Fasting will actually help the spiritually immature to become mature. In fact, the more mature you are, the less you, perhaps, will need fasting as a spiritual discipline.

One of the purposes of fasting as we will see in just a few moments is to help my sensitivity to the spiritual realm of God and His kingdom, so it’s all the more important that the spiritually immature practice fasting rather than the very spiritual.

B. Definition of Fasting.

**Fasting = the self-denial of any routine pleasure
in order to gain pleasure in God.**

The Bible tells us that you can fast from many things other than food. Normally food is the routine pleasure that is voluntarily abstained, but it can be anything that you routinely enjoy or need. For example, the Apostle Paul tells the married Christians at Corinth that they can abstain from sexual activity for a season of prayer and fasting.

“Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (1 Corinthians 7:5)

So, we see it can be any pleasurable experience that you can abstain from for a season in order to draw near to God in prayer. Let’s say you’re fasting from food. What we’re saying to God is, “I’m abstaining from food so that I can devote the amount of time I would be enjoying that pleasurable experience in drawing near to You in prayer and enjoying Your presence. I do this, O’ Lord, because ultimately Your pleasure exceeds all pleasures, even the delight of eating.” God gave you the pleasure of eating, therefore He has to be better. That’s what fasting is. It’s to deny yourself of any routine pleasure in order to gain more pleasure in God.

In this message we are going to deal with the fasting of food because this is the main way we see fasting in Scripture and I think it is one of the most important of all spiritual disciplines. Fasting is

very important to your sensitivity to the pleasure you can have in God.

I know some of you are thinking, *Why would anyone want to do that to themselves? Why a message on fasting? We're here to be helped in our spiritual walk, to be encouraged. There are probably lost people here who need to hear the Gospel...* Don't worry, they'll hear the Gospel even in the discussion of fasting. The reason for this message is because this is what Jesus did and He said we are to be like Him. If you are to be a disciple of Christ, you must be like your Master. That's what we've seen all throughout this series. Jesus fasted therefore we fast as well.

II. Fasting Methods

A. The Complete Abstinence of Food and Water.

Moses did this. For forty days and forty nights he neither ate nor drank, which means it was a supernatural fast. God helped him to do this because the body can't go much longer than three days without water. This was a supernatural fast. We're not calling anybody to a forty day fast. In fact, if someone came to me and said, "I think God is calling me to a forty day fast," I'm going to strongly argue against that because only God can equip somebody for something like that. But for a short fast, like a day, you can abstain from both food and water.

B. The Complete Abstinence of Food but not Liquids.

You don't eat but still take in water or juice. An example of this is Jesus Himself. In our text the Bible says after forty days He was hungry, it doesn't say He was also thirsty which implies He probably didn't fast from liquids but only food.

Our text says that after 40 days He was hungry but it does not say He was thirsty. "And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry" (Matthew 4:2). In Luke's account it says that Jesus, "ate nothing, and afterward . . . He was hungry" (Luke 4:2). Luke is specific, Jesus ate nothing and was hungry. He does not say, "Jesus ate and drank nothing and afterward He was both hungry and thirsty."

C. The Partial Abstinence of Food.

What is a partial fast? I mean, either you abstain or you don't, right? Well, not necessarily. Daniel gives us an example of this kind of fast. For three weeks Daniel fasted and he describes that fast this way,

"I ate no pleasant food (the ESV says, "I ate no delicacies"), no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled." (Daniel 10:3)

In other words, he limited himself to a bland vegetarian diet for three weeks and the Bible sanctions it a fast. You can fast from your normal diet and eat a plain diet. Anything that will deprive

you of that pleasure so that you seek pleasure in God is a fast. A partial abstinence of food would be one of those methods.

D. Length of Fasts.

Let me give you two conditions that determine how long you should fast. Like I said, I would not attempt a forty-day fast unless I was absolutely sure God told me.

Years ago, I was preaching in Bucharest at one of the largest evangelical churches in Romania, Holy Trinity Baptist Church. It was a very moving service, God was very gracious in helping me to preach that day and at the conclusion of the service I greeted the people. We prayed for some and then walked outside as more people were still coming up and talking to me. One dear, elderly lady began talking to me but she didn't know English and I didn't know Romanian so we weren't communicating, to say the least. So I asked the pastor standing beside me to translate. She repeated what she said and this is what he told me she said,

“I believe God told me that one day you are going to go to Iraq to preach and when you do, before you go, you need to fast for forty days and forty nights.”

I thanked her and gave her my appreciation and thought nothing of it. *What do you mean you thought nothing of it?* you ask. *Maybe God was speaking to you.* Well, He might have been. And when I get an invitation to go to Iraq to preach, I'll take that lady's admonition seriously. One day I might get such an invitation I'll remember that and believe me, it may not be a total abstinence of food and water for forty days but it will be some kind of fast waiting upon God.

The length of fast is not to be determined by somebody saying they had a vision or word from God for you.

Let your physical condition and the Holy Spirit determine length of fast.

If you are physically able, I am suggesting every Christian fast. This is not an option. I'm not preaching this as a suggestion. I believe this is a biblical discipline that ought to be practiced on a regular basis by God's people. You will find out why in just a few minutes.

If you're a diabetic I would say you probably shouldn't fast unless you are absolutely sure God has called you to do so and then you should always keep yourself monitored during that fast.

Another determining factor is the Holy Spirit. I believe the Holy Spirit calls us to fast. I have had this happen so many times. He calls me to get alone for a few days and separate myself from relationships and food and just get alone in quiet with Him. The Holy Spirit should dictate how long you should fast.

And again, one should not go more than three days without water. I would say actually you shouldn't go more than two days without water because you can do severe damage to your organs and the third day you are into fatal territory. Please do not deprive yourself of liquids more than two days at the most.

The other determining factor in the length of fasts is the purpose. The purpose of the fast will also determine how long the fast should last. In a few moments I'm going to give you some biblical reasons for fasting.

E. Frequency of Fasts.

If every Christian is called to fast, how often should we do so?

1. The Holy Spirit's call to fast.

2. Hunger for God.

Fasting is a way to express hunger for God. It's a way to worship Him by expressing your hunger for Him. The hungrier, the more fasting you may need to do for a while.

3. The need to humble the flesh.

If you are not starving these fleshly appetites and bringing them into submission to your will, then they are bringing you into submission to their will. One of the best ways to get your body into submission is to deprive it of its most basic necessity—food. If you've never fasted more than a meal, you don't know what I'm talking about. You may have some idea, but when you go to a multiple day fast, believe me, your body is screaming and crying at you for nourishment. The mind will be very sensitive to the hunger pains you experience. You will fight this urge to break the fast and get something to eat.

One man fasted for an entire day and he was so hungry and his psychological condition was so weak that he stayed up past midnight so that at the stroke after midnight he raided the kitchen. He really couldn't go a full 24 hours. Why? These appetites are so strong. They have a pull on us we don't realize until we say *no* to them. This is the illustration of unplugging from the world. Fasting is the adapter on the spiritual cord that is suited to the spiritual power of God. This flesh cannot do that without God's spiritual disciplines aiding us.

Your need to bring your flesh into submission will dictate the frequency of your fast.

III. The Purpose of Fasting

A. For Guidance.

I need specific direction, so I fast. We see this all the time in Scriptures. One notable case is in Judges. There was a civil war in Israel. Some vile, vile men of the tribe of Benjamin had done a wicked deed unheard of in all of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin would not discipline those men so Israel fought against them. They almost annihilated them completely. At the beginning of the civil war, the tribe of Benjamin was winning over the other nine tribes.

“Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. ²⁷ So the children of Israel inquired of the LORD (the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days), saying, “Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?” And the LORD said, “Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.” (Judges 20:26-28)

The whole nation fasted before the Lord. It is a very appropriate thing to take time away from food and normal schedule to say, “God, I’ve got to hear You. I don’t want to do what I want. I don’t want my will. I’ve done that before and it’s never led to a good outcome. I need Your direction because I don’t want to be wise in my own eyes. I need Your pleasure and will operating in my life. Therefore, I need to get alone with You, because You’re better than my normal routine. You’re better than sitting at the table three times a day. I’ve got to hear from You.”

B. For Help in a Difficult Time.

“Then there came some that told Jehoshaphat, saying, There cometh a great multitude against thee from beyond the sea on this side Syria; and, behold, they [be] in Hazazontamar, which [is] Engedi. ³ And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴ And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask help of the LORD: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.” (2 Chronicles 20:2-4)

Help in a difficult time is a godly purpose for fasting.

But these are Old Testament references. I would rather pick more New Testament references.

C. For the Ministries of the Church—Specifically Missions and Evangelism.

In Acts 13 the Bible says after the Spirit of God broke in to the church at Antioch God spoke and said I want you to send Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey.

“Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” (Acts 13:3)

This church recognized nothing like this had been done before. They had no clue how to do it, so they prayed and fasted and waited on God. This was a huge moment. Did they understand the significance? I don’t know, but I do know they understood it enough to say, “We need more

than just prayer, we need to fast. We need to seek You, God, because You and Your pleasure is far greater than any pleasure we could have.”

I love this about the early church. They didn't get together and write a program. They didn't come together and try to formulate plans and ideas that they thought the community would be responsive as we do today. When church leadership today tries to do missions and evangelism we try to find the best idea Nashville has or some latest church growth book has or some other technique a conference speaker has taught. My dear friends, who knows better than God how to accomplish His work? It is worthy of the investment to get alone with God to pray and even fast until God shows up and shows us how we can touch this world for Him.

Don't be surprised if in the next few weeks we call a fast to pray and seek God for His direction and purposes in missions and evangelism. It's that important and needs God's direction. It's so important that in Acts fourteen when Paul and Barnabas finished their missionary journey they went back to established elders in those churches they had planted and did so through the means of fasting.

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:23)

Ministry needs more than the casual common prayers that are so often uttered. No, this is serious and it needs God's attention so it requires disciplining ourselves and seeking the face of God.

Ultimately all the purposes I could give you from Scripture find their root in one thing and one thing only—we fast for God's sake.

E. For God's Sake.

In Matthew 6, Jesus gives an exposition on fasting.

“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:17-18)

What does Jesus mean? Most interpret Jesus saying that when you fast you need to be spiritually secretive and make sure nobody knows you're fasting. We tend to get this legalistic tendency that says, “Oh, I better not let anybody know.”

That is not the point Jesus was making. Read carefully verse 18. A biblical true fast is to seek God for His own sake. A biblical fast is when a person fasts for God's sake, when God is the reward.

The Pharisees and Scribes were fasting for the approval of others and that was their reward. It's not about being secretive; it's about the purpose for which you are fasting. Are you fasting to be

seen as spiritual? If so, you're not fasting for the right reasons. But if God becomes your ultimate reward and who sees you in secret and rewards you openly, then that is the full and intended purpose of fasting. It's for the sake of God, getting alone with Him and enjoying the pleasure that is found only in Him. Jesus was stating a contrast—those whose reward to fasting is men's respect and admiration versus those whose reward to fasting is God's respect and admiration.

In Matthew 17 we have another misinterpreted statement of Jesus. When nine of His disciples couldn't cast a demon out of a little boy they asked why they couldn't and He said it was because of their lack of faith.

“However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” (Matthew 17:21)

We interpret that to say those who pray and fast more will have more power with God and they can cast out devils. That's not what Jesus meant. Jesus would never make power the prize of prayer and fasting—the prize was always God. You fast for God's sake—He's the reward! He said to Abraham, “I am your exceedingly great reward.” In Hebrews 11 it tells us that when we seek God we seek Him because we believe He is the reward. He said, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). God is the reward and He rewards with Himself.

Power to perform the miraculous is not the ultimate prize—it's God. What Jesus is saying is if God is really your prize, goal, and the intent of your pleasure seeking, then you will spend much time in prayer and fasting because you love Him. When you are alone with God in prayer and fasting something happens to you. You become more like the person you're spending time with and you get so close to Him that His fragrance rubs off on you. Therefore, when you leave the prayer closet and cease your fast even demons tremble because they smell God on you. That's what He means. God is the reason we fast.

“As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, ‘Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.’” (Acts 13:2)

What were they doing? They fasted to seek God because He is the ultimate prize. You see, the reason we fast is because we're hungry for God more than we're hungry for food. Is that true about you and your soul? Are you hungrier for Him than for your daily sustenance? Remember, man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. That's more than just Scriptures, that's God taking the Scriptures and making them real to you. Don't you crave God to talk to you through the Word? Don't you hunger for His fellowship and communion? That's why we get alone with God and deprive our bodies of their natural sustenance because we have a sustenance far greater than we need. God is real to us. Church, that's what this is all about. It's not about being religious. It's not about practicing some ancient art of asceticism. It's because God is a real God and we're so hungry for Him that we need Him more than we need relationships and food. That's what this is about.

Whether we realize it or not, every one of us need Him. Thankfully you don't have to fast to find Him. Fasting is for people who already know Him, as you'll see in just a few moments. God has already made Himself known to you in the person of Jesus Christ. You can know it's true that God loves you because He committed His Son to a cross and killed Him for you. You need no other evidence that God cares about you and loves you than the cross. God cannot make His love any clearer or more proficiently than in the death of His Son. Wake up! God has already shown you that He loves you. He killed His Son so He could have fellowship with you because your sins could not allow a holy God to get together with you.

Fasting is not for non-Christians. It's for we who know Him and who have a hunger that this world cannot satisfy. However, I am aware that for the Christians in this room there is not a great hunger. I want to recommend you to fast.

You may not be all that hungry for the Lord. But the Bible teaches us that when we are not spiritually very hungry that it is all the more reason to feast on God. I believe every Christian is hungry for God, we want more of Him and desire to have fellowship with Him. We do desire to hear Him, and we want Him to lead and direct us, but we're not always *that* hungry. Again, I want to recommend fasting.

IV. How Fasting Creates a Hunger For God

How does it do so?

If you'll remember my definition of fasting:

**Fasting = the self-denial of any routine pleasure
in order to gain pleasure in God.**

Fasting is one of the Scripturally approved means to seek and find delight in God and His will for our lives.

A. New Covenant Fasting.

Jesus said fasting would increase your hunger for God because this is what it's all about. It's not about bribing God; it's not about trying to convince God you're really spiritual, it's all about your hunger. If you're not real hungry, listen closely.

In Luke 5, the Pharisees attack Jesus by questioning Him yet again. This time the question is in verse 33.

“Then they said to Him, ‘Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?’” (Luke 5:33)

In other words, “Jesus, we’re going to prove that the fruits of Your ministry aren’t as spiritual as ours. We’re going to prove that You’re not the spiritual leader people think You are, because the fruits of Your disciples’ lives will indicate what kind of teacher You are. Look at John the Baptist. His disciples fast often. Look at our disciples, they fast often as well. But look at Your disciples—they party all the time.”

Side note: there is some truth to looking at the disciples of Jesus to find out what Jesus is like. Unfortunately, most of the disciples the world sees today don’t look like Jesus and therefore they reject our Jesus.

But in this case the Pharisees were absolutely wrong. They were looking at the eating and drinking and thought they were all partying and celebrating and not being spiritual, but they had a wrong conclusion. They did not understand who Jesus was and what He was really doing. He was bringing the kingdom of God upon this world.

Why did the disciples not fast? The Lord’s answer was that the kind of fasting John’s disciples and the Pharisee’s did was a kind of fasting that was not compatible with the New Covenant.

“And He said to them, ‘Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?’” (Luke 5:34)

In other words, “Can you make the disciples, the friends of the bridegroom, who is Jesus, mourn and grieve while the bridegroom is with them?” This tells us that Old Covenant fasting was associated with mourning over sin and a longing for the Bridegroom to come.

I know this is a little tedious but this will help you understand. Old Covenant fasting was primarily for the mourning of sin and the longing anticipation of the Messiah and His kingdom.

To Express Grief Over Sin.

When Jonah preaches to the Ninevites that God was going to judge them, what did the Ninevites do?

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.” (Jonah 3:5)

You see it over and over again in the Old Testament fasting used as a way to mourn and grieve over sin.

The Difference in Fasting in the Two Covenants

“But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days.” (Luke 5:35)

There was coming a time when Christ would no longer be physically with them. Therefore, when that time came they would fast. But Jesus calls it a new type of fast. He illustrates using two illustrations that are the same. He speaks about patching an old garment with new cloth and putting new wine into old wineskins.

“Then He spoke a parable to them: ‘No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old.’³⁷ And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined.³⁸ But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” (Luke 5:36-38)

You start new. You can't put new wine in old wineskins because the new wine will expand in its fermentation and it will burst the wineskins and you'll lose your wine. Jesus is saying He is coming with a New Covenant. His New Covenant is not about fasting over your sins. Do we need to fast over our sins? No, we don't need to. You don't need to fast when you sin because you don't have to show God how sorry you are by depriving yourself of food. You already have an Advocate that's taken care of your sins. “If any man sins,” says the Apostle John, “he has an Advocate with the Father.” He doesn't tell them to go fast and put on a long face and go through this exercise of abasement, no—go to God! Mourn your sins, but do so with hope! We have an Advocate who has taken care of our sins and I can approach God knowing He will receive me and forgive me and cleanse me. Have you done that? How can you do that today? How can you have any hope that if you seek God to cleanse you and make you a new person He will? Because we have an advocate—Christ Jesus the Lord who has already died.

Neither do we fast in order to usher in the Messiah—He's already come. Jesus is calling for a new kind of fasting that would be based upon our Lord's finished work of redemption. It would be based upon the glories we have already experienced. Fasting now is not based upon my lack but upon my satisfaction. I fast now because I've already tasted Jesus and discovered that He's wonderful and I can't just have one taste. Our tasting and fasting leaves us with an insatiable desire for more. We are not full. We are satisfied but not full, there is room for more of Him. We fast because Jesus is that wonderful. Being alone with Him and turning down the appetites of the body so I can hear the Spirit is that good. It's worth it.

B. The Power of New Covenant Fasting.

The power of New Covenant fasting is that it weans you from the world and works the Kingdom rule of God deeper into our lives. In other words, fasting desensitizes us to the world and sensitizes you to God.

About once a year I will go away for about three days and get alone with God and fast. Normally I do that and then come back home but one particular year I went to a little cabin in Tennessee and went down for three days, alone with God. It was real quiet, no traffic, perfect solitude. At the beginning of the fourth day I broke my fast and Karen came to get me. It was close to our

anniversary so we went on to Nashville to celebrate for a few days. It was around lunchtime when we got into Nashville so we decided to go by Chick-Fil-A. As we drove into Nashville I started to notice what was going on in my heart. I began to weep and cry. I was brokenhearted over people I saw dressed immodestly. I had never been broken over that before. It bothered me when I heard the kind of language men were using across the restaurant and I began to weep when they took my Lord's name in vain.

Something happened those three days alone with God and then I was immediately thrown back into the world. I learned something. If you get alone before God and you fast, your natural, normal way of relating to the world gets changed. It's truly unplugging from the world. And those appetites begin to be suppressed and weakened. They begin to be starved and your Spirit begins to be strengthened so much so that when you walk into the world you now see it for what it really is. Before fasting those three days I had become accustomed to it. It was normal to me. I didn't think a thing about it. Now I noticed it. Why? Because my Spirit was more sensitive to God, which means I was more sensitive to the world and its rebellion against God. That's the power of New Covenant fasting. It will intensify your hunger for God and desensitize your soul to the things of this world so that you will see them for what they are and not want them. You will want only God.

Those spiritual sensitivities are true Christianity. Real New Testament Christianity is not doing what religious people and preachers tell you to do: pray the prayer, get baptized, do good, and stop doing the bad things. You cannot do that. I don't care how old you are, you will still fail at trying to get to God that way. God has to do something to your soul, the sensitivities, the way you think, the way you feel, the way you love, the way you hate. He has to change the heart, the control center. And that's what He does. He will do it for any of you this morning that will call upon Him in true humility and brokenness. God will give you a new heart. But once you get a new heart we have a responsibility to keep that heart sensitive to God. Otherwise the flesh with all of its appetites—the desires of the mind and body—begin to get strong again and take precedence. God has given us these spiritual disciplines, like fasting, to help keep the new heart sensitive to Him and not the world.

I pray as you've heard this message today that the hunger you have in your heart will say, "I want to have more. And if by depriving myself of routine pleasures like eating in order to enjoy God the way He is meant to enjoy God then it's worth it and I can't wait to fast." Amen.