



# FASTING & FEASTING

## Embodied Spirituality

We worship God and we love God in and with our bodies. We worship God and we love God in physical and tangible ways.

How we think about our bodies matters. Do we see our body as an enemy to be defeated? An idol to be served? A shell to be ignored? Our bodies and what we do with our bodies demonstrate in real, visible ways who we were created to be: people who love God and love others.

Fasting and feasting are natural, bodily responses to life's moments. **Fasting** is a response to a sacred moment, an awareness of our need for God's presence. **Feasting** is when, having experienced God's presence, we respond to his kindness and provision with hopeful abundance.

**Fasting and feasting connect body and soul.** These practices engage our senses, our emotions, our creativity, our intuitions. They reinforce the truth that we were made to be whole people, not just spiritual beings restrained by and confined to physical bodies. As author Scot McKnight says, "Fasting is the body talking what the spirit yearns, what the soul longs for, and what the mind knows to be true." The same applies for feasting.

## A Word of Caution

Fasting and feasting are embodied spiritual practices in a broken world. Therefore, they may not be accessible to every person in every season of life. Physical and/or mental health limitations may affect your engagement with one or both of these practices. We at Soma want to be clear: if you are unable to engage with these practices during your current season of life for any health reason — physical, mental, or emotional — please do not feel pressure to do so.

In particular, if someone is currently suffering from an eating disorder or has a history with disordered eating, fasting and feasting can carry physical, behavioral, or psychological risks. Those with eating disorders may feel stuck about how to approach the practice of fasting. If you or someone in your group is facing this challenge, we hope you'll consider the following:

- **Receive grace from Jesus.** See this as an opportunity to ask some really important questions: Who does God say you are? Are there wounds from your past that need attention? What deeper, unmet desires are behind your relationship with your body and with food? Are there lies about God or about yourself which are setting the narrative? Know that God's love is greater than your fear and that he is with you always. Jesus offers you grace and mercy instead of shame and rejection. Ask God for healing and for freedom.
- **Talk with someone.** If you haven't already, seek counsel from a medical or mental health professional. Is it wise to practice fasting or feasting right now? What risks would you encounter? Share what's going on with a trusted leader or friend at Soma. Invite them to walk through this struggle with you.
- **Seek alternative ways of fasting and feasting.** In Isaiah 58, God told Israel to respond to the needs of others by divesting themselves of some resource for the common good. Instead of fasting and feasting that involves food, think of ways to use your time, energy, and other resources to meet specific needs in your community. If you want to try to keep this practice centered on food, consider continuing to eat normally but spending your mealtimes in silence, solitude, and prayer. However you choose to participate in this practice, respond to God by communing with him and pleading with him on behalf of others.

## Community of Practice

Significant and sustainable change requires a community of support. We highly recommend that you work through this guide with your missional community (MC), discipleship group, family, roommates, or coworkers.

Ideally, this "community of practice" should gather weekly or biweekly at a set time (approximately an hour). The goal isn't to rigidly follow the guide, but rather to stimulate healthy conversations, reflection, experiments, and accountability.

# WEEKS ONE & TWO: FASTING TOGETHER

## Read This Overview

Fasting is quite possibly the least popular spiritual formation practice in our culture. Most people see fasting as a “varsity level” Christian practice. Only the recent health fad of intermittent fasting has brought the practice of fasting into popular culture, but a regular fast aimed at shaping the soul rather than the body is left to the monks. After all, weren’t Jesus’ disciples known for not fasting (Matt. 2 & 9)?

In reality, those seeking to know God, be conformed to his image, and see his Kingdom come in this world have been fasting since before recorded history. Early Christians fasted twice a week in addition to special seasons of personal or corporate fasting.

Fasting existed then and today as a way to align a weakened body to the cries and needs of our spirit, to humble ourselves and repent of sin, to weaken the power of our fleshly nature, and to plead for God’s movement or presence in earnest.

## Discuss

- Share your experience with fasting in your life. This could be a personal experience or through the experience of another.
- What do you see as the purpose of fasting?
- What concerns do you have about the practice of fasting?
- Is there anything that intrigues or excites you about fasting?
- What could fasting corporately bring to the experience?
- What would it look like for this group or our church to incorporate regular rhythms of fasting?

## Practice Fasting Together

Fast the day leading up to your next MC discussion meeting (skipping breakfast and lunch of that day). Plan to break the fast with a MC family dinner as you meet to discuss your fasting experience together.

During the time when you would be eating breakfast or lunch, take 20 minutes to an hour to pray, silently sit in the presence of God, and/or journal your prayers and experience of fasting.

If you have reasons why it is unwise for you to fast, please use your discretion in choosing a way to participate. If you have concerns about your body’s reaction to a fast, you may consider planning to drink a fruit juice as a meal replacement.

## Practice Breaking the Fast

Either during or after your dinner, give time for each person to share their experience of the day's fast. Conversation starters could include:

- What surprised you?
- What was difficult about the fast?
- How did the physical experience of not eating affect the spiritual experience of the day?
- Did anyone experience a strong presence of the Spirit during their fast?

Revisit these questions:

- What do you see as the purpose of fasting?
- What was it like to fast with a group of people?
- Did you experience the concept of starving the flesh and feeding the spirit today?
- What would it look like for this group or our church to incorporate regular rhythms of fasting?

# WEEKS THREE & FOUR: FEASTING TOGETHER

## Debrief Last Week's Practice (10 minutes)

Break into smaller groups and debrief using these questions:

- How was your practice last week? What was easy/hard? What impact did it have on your week?
- What was encouraging? What was discouraging?
- What did this experiment reveal about God, yourself, and others?
- Based on last week's experience, how are you feeling about this week's practice?

## Read This Overview

For the average American, every day is a virtual feast. We use and overuse food without thinking much about it. Each meal is a pathway to indulgence. As a result, we have grown dull to the joy and wonder of having ample food and drink.

In the Old Testament, the seasons and years of Israel included days of fasting and days of feasting. God designed this rhythm to create in his people a deeper longing for him and an anticipation for what he was going to do in the world. The feasts were bodily and communal representations of that spiritual longing and anticipation, which were ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

For us, feasting is the bodily and communal appreciation of God and his abundant kindness. Feasting is not primarily about the food and drink, or an excuse to eat and drink too much. Good food and drink accentuate a Godward celebration of some specific event or answer to prayer. We celebrate what God has done, and we also look forward in hopeful anticipation to the second coming of Jesus Christ. Sharing good food and drink, singing, and speaking words of thanksgiving strengthens our will and solidifies in our hearts the joy of following Jesus. Our feasting is enjoyed with Jesus as the center.

## Discussion

- How is feasting a complementary practice to fasting?
- Have you experienced good, celebratory feasting before? If so, when and how?
- What would it look like for this group or our church to incorporate regular rhythms of fasting and feasting?
- Practicing the way of Jesus forms and shapes us, but these practices are also meant to give life to the world around us. How could a regular rhythm of feasting be a blessing and a light to our community?

## Practice Feasting Together

Set a date, time, and location for your feast. Consider following these steps as you participate in this spiritual practice:

- **Prepare.** Since indulgence can easily be the baseline for everyday eating, good preparation for feasting begins before the actual feast day. In the days leading up to your feast, make it a point to exercise self-control in eating and drinking. By doing so, you will keep your stomach (and your heart) primed for special indulgence.
- **Plan.** How can this time of feasting be centered on Jesus and encouraging one another? One way is to allow plenty of time to cook or order food and to share the load of responsibility. Who will host and help with setting up the eating space? Who will bring food and drinks? Who could play music or lead the group in song? As you're planning for your feast, make sure that as many people as possible can share in the preparation and the execution.
- **Speak.** Another way that we can keep Jesus at the center of our feast is to make space for the reading of Scripture and/or prayer. There are many psalms of thanksgiving and adoration that would be appropriate to read at the beginning of your feast. Including these at the beginning of your feast sets the tone and aligns our hearts with God's.
- **Share.** It is always encouraging to hear what God is doing in someone else's life or situation. Part of your feast should include a time for sharing during which folks can give voice to answered prayers and personal growth. This time can also include words of encouragement directed toward others in the group.
- **Enjoy.** Eat, drink, laugh, tell stories, sing. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!"

# RESOURCES FOR THE JOURNEY

- [\*Celebration of Discipline\*](#) by Richard Foster
- [\*Fasting: The Ancient Practices\*](#) by Scot McKnight
- [\*God's Chosen Fast\*](#) by Arthur Wallis
- [\*Keeping the Sabbath Wholly\*](#) by Marva Dawn
- [\*"Feasting & Fasting - Spiritual Symmetry"\*](#) by The Bible Project podcast