

The Lenten Fasting Challenge

First Presbyterian Church of Dunellen
March/April 2011

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A SEASON OF PRAYER AND FASTING

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A GENERAL GUIDE TO PRAYER AND FASTING

Throughout the Bible, when the people of God faced unusual challenges, when they had especially great hopes, and when they wanted to realize God's presence in a special way, the spiritual leaders would call for a season of prayer and fasting. In celebration of all that God has done in the year past, in petition for God's continued guidance during this time of transition in our church, and in anticipation of all that God will do in the year ahead the pastors have challenged our congregation to a four-week season of prayer and fasting as we prepare to celebrate Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday.

WHY FASTING? The act of going without food for a limited period of time is a spiritual discipline. Our hunger for food becomes a symbol of (and a tangible experience of) our hunger for God. Whenever one feels a pang of hunger, it is a reminder to pray, a reminder that we depend on God for all of our sustenance. The times we might spend feeding our bodies we set apart for the nourishment of our souls through worship and prayer. Again and again believers have borne witness that fasting has drawn them closer to God and has released God's power in a new way in their lives.

Matthew 6:16-18 *When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Acts 13:2-3 ²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 14:3 ³Paul and Barnabas appointed elders[£] for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

HOW TO HAVE A PARTIAL FAST. Most people should introduce themselves to the discipline of fasting by participating on a partial fast. There are several forms of partial fasting.

- Skip one meal each day. For this type of partial fast, choose one meal each day that you will skip, and use that time instead for prayer, Bible reading, and meditating on God's Word. For instance, if you choose to skip lunch, start the day with a healthy breakfast which is low on carbs, and high on protein (carbs make you feel full quickly, but they are also metabolized quickly leaving you feeling hungry and low). If you want, have a light snack mid-morning. When you would

normally eat lunch, find a quiet place to spend some quality time with God. At dinner time, because you'll feel hungry, the tendency will be to overeat. Plan a light meal, then wait thirty to forty-five minutes to let your body tell your brain whether you really need more to eat. (Our Wednesday night Soup Suppers are a great way to break this kind of a fast.)

- Eliminate a particular food from your diet. One discipline that many have found helpful is to fast from meat or some other food that's normal but not essential in your diet (such as meat, sugar, or even chocolate) for several weeks at a time (for instance, for the season of Lent). At first you'll probably find yourself craving this food at all times of the day. Whenever you have a craving, use it as a reminder to pray "Lord, I'm really craving ___ right now, but I know that it will never truly satisfy. Only you can satisfy the hunger in my soul. Help me to desire you more than I desire this food."

HOW TO HAVE A 24 HOUR FULL-FAST. For most people, the most effective form of fast is to refrain from solid foods for a limited period of time. If you decide to join our season of prayer and fasting, I recommend that you have a light, healthy meal on the night before you begin fasting. The next morning, begin your day with prayer and a glass of fruit juice. (If you're a regular coffee drinker, have a cup to avoid a headache.) Throughout the day consume plenty of fluids, with your best choices being water and fruit juice. (Most soft-drinks tend to give you a sugar high, followed by a sugar low!) The following morning you can break your fast with prayer, thanksgiving and a healthy, low-fat breakfast.

During the Lenten Fasting Challenge, you may choose to fast one day a week between now and Easter. It's really between God and you.

If you have any medical problems, please consult your physician before starting any fast. Even if you can't fast, you can participate in our season of prayer. Although it is unlikely, if at any time you begin to feel faint or ill, go ahead and have something to eat.

Oh, and one other thing. Fasting is an inward, not an outward, discipline. In other words, it's best kept between you, God, and others who are sharing your fast.

I'd like to invite you to join me and the elders of our church in a season of prayer and fasting between now and Easter, April 24. I anticipate that the Lord will move in miraculous ways in our midst as we come to God in humility and prayer.

A GUIDE TO PRAYER DURING A DAY OF FASTING

THROUGHOUT THE DAY

Whenever you feel a pang of hunger, take that as a reminder to come to God in prayer. Look around you. Do you see someone walking or sitting nearby? Whether a stranger, co-worker, family member, or friend, take a few moments to silently thank God for that person and to pray that God's grace will be poured out in his or her life in a special way this day.

Use the blank pages in this booklet to record any ideas and insights you receive while spending time with God. Write down any commitments you make. Record your prayers so that you can look back later this year and see how God has responded to our petitions.

IN THE MORNING

When you would normally be eating breakfast, spend some quiet time with God.

READ Matthew 4:1-11.

CONSIDER why Jesus may have begun his ministry with a time of prayer and fasting. How might this have prepared him to face his time of trial? Think about where you have been feeling spiritual hunger and ask God to fill your soul. Think about ways that you hope to experience God's power today. Where in your life do you find the most difficult temptations? How would you like God's angels to attend to you?

PRAY this morning for yourself and for your family, focusing particularly on asking God to draw you into an ever more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Offer God any needs you are feeling, and praise for as many blessings as you can bring to mind.

IN THE AFTERNOON

This afternoon, when you would normally be eating lunch, spend some quiet time with God.

READ Matthew 6:5-18.

CONSIDER the way that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. What promises does God offer you in this passage? What challenges? Think about what it means for God's Kingdom to exist on earth as it does in heaven? How can the ministry of our church be a part of this prayer? How can you contribute to bringing about the answer you desire?

PRAY this afternoon for our church.

Pray by name for our pastors, Jeff and Silvio. Pray for the members of session and deacons. Pray for our ministries, including:

- Education: For the work of the Sunday school, adult education programs, youth group, confirmation class, and the team that will be working on a new children's ministry.
- Mission and Outreach: For our ministries of invitation to the community, hospitality to those who come to visit the church, and outreach through social service and missions.
- Property and Finance: For direction in setting priorities for building maintenance and usage, stewardship education, and effective use of all of our capital resources.
- Worship: For continued growth of both of our worship services, and that our times of worship may both glorify God and nourish the hearts of those who worship here.
- Church Life: That as our congregation grows we may develop new ways of building meaningful relationships with God and one another.
- Ministry Development: That we will be able to help each person discover and develop ministry gifts that strengthen the church and bring a sense of purpose and joy to the believer.
- Youth: That our youth leaders will effectively build relationships with the teenagers in our church and community, leading them to become lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ.
- Personnel: For our secretary, Maria; our custodian, Jim; our Director of Worship and Music, Karl; and our volunteer staff members Jim and Ned.

Pray for God to help us achieve our vision that to be "a multicultural family, growing in faith, connecting people with Christ."

IN THE EVENING

This evening, when you would normally be eating dinner, spend some quiet time with God.

READ 2 Chronicles 7:13-16.

CONSIDER: What kinds of issues do you think Israel may have been facing in this passage? What does God require of them? What promises does God make in this passage, and how can we claim them for our own lives, our own community, our own nation?

PRAY this evening for our community and nation. Pray for the elected leaders in your town. Pray for our governor, senators, and representatives. Pray for President Obama, that he may have wisdom and godly vision as he leads our nation. Pray for those in our nation who are on the outskirts of society, such as those who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, those who are poor, lonely, or suffering from racism. Pray for our youth as another school year draws to a close. Pray for a movement of God's spirit that will turn the hearts and minds of our nation to Jesus Christ. Ask God to make your heart sensitive to the needs of some group in our nation and to open doorways to ministry so that you may be an instrument of God's peace.

AT BEDTIME

READ Matthew 28:16-20.

CONSIDER what it may mean to be God's witnesses to "the ends of the earth." What are we called to do? What is God's promise as we pursue this commission?

PRAY for the church around the world. Choose some nation, other than our own, that has special meaning to you. Pray for the physical, political, and spiritual needs of the people living in that nation. Ask God to show you how you can touch the lives of those whose lives may be very different from your own.

THE NEXT MORNING

Before you break your fast in the morning take some time to pray. Also jot down any insights or special experiences of God that you had during your day of prayer and fasting.