WHAT IS THIS FASTING THING?

Fasting is giving up something good in order to pursue something better.

Throughout the history of God’s people, fasting has been a common spiritual discipline. Jesus fasted on our behalf for 40 days and nights in the wilderness.

In Matthew 6:16, Jesus says, ‘When you fast, do not look sombre …’. Jesus says when, not if, you fast. He assumes that fasting, along with prayer and giving, is a part of the life of his followers.

Fasting unfolds more of God’s goodness and teaches us that we can rely on him. It can help to break the power of things that tangle us up and keep us from prayer. The aim of fasting is not to win God’s favour

or impress others, but rather to help us focus on God, walk with Jesus, have ears open to what the Spirit is saying, and to open space and time for prayer.

In the Bible we see that fasting was part of the discipline of God’s people when a great tragedy occurred (Joel 1:14–20); in times of repentance (Jonah 3:6–10; Nehemiah 9:1,2); during spiritual warfare (Jesus in the wilderness, Matthew 4:1–4; ‘This kind of demon can come out only by prayer and fasting’, Mark 9:29); and before starting a great endeavour for God or stepping out in faith (Acts 13:1–3; Acts 14:23).

When we look at these reasons for fasting, we can see that almost all of them apply to us still today. We are stepping out on a great endeavour for God in the church-planting movement. The great tragedy of knowing there are many lost people in our countries also leads us to pray for repentance in ourselves and in others. When we step out in mission (as when God brings in the harvest of new believers), we also step into significant spiritual warfare, as our church planters and evangelists will tell you from personal experience.

Of course, fasting must never become a legalistic rule. There is a risk that we can become pharisaical (‘I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get’) and see ourselves as better than others, more holy or pious or religious. Jesus spoke strongly against that. However, Jesus also said to his followers, ‘Deny yourself, and take up your cross, and follow me’. There is a risk that if we don’t fast, we miss the good things that God wants to do with us, in us and in our church.

What shall we pray for as we fast?

•Pray for God to send out harvest workers: evangelists, church planters and pastors (Luke 10:2, Acts 13:1–3).

•Pray for those who don’t yet know Jesus, especially your friends, workmates and family, that they might come to know Jesus.

•Pray for the victory of Jesus to defeat the devil and banish him. Pray that the church may step into Jesus’ victory in spiritual warfare.

•Pray for wholehearted worship.

•Listen to the voice of God.

•Pray for God to grow our church. 1 Corinthians 3:6,7 says that Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the growth. Pray specifically by name for our church plants, sending congregations and church planters.

PRACTICAL STEPS IN FASTING

•Drink plenty of water.

•Start small. A 12-hour fast means no food between breakfast and dinner. Skip lunch and use the time to pray. An 18-hour fast means no food between lunch and breakfast. Skip dinner (and snacks) and use the time to pray.

•The hunger pangs go away. They don’t control you. Use them as a prompt for prayer.