

EAT, FAST, FEAST

STUDY GUIDE

For Lent, Advent, and Everything in Between

Dear Reader,

I wrote this guide in response to requests from friends, family members, teachers, and book club leaders. They wanted a way to use *Eat, Fast, Feast* to dig deeper into the benefits of fasting. The guide can be used any time of year, but it works nicely during Advent, after Epiphany and before Ash Wednesday, or during Lent itself.

For centuries Christians fasted to remove distractions, to offer a sacrifice to God, to discipline their bodies and souls, to enrich their prayer life, to fight the powers of darkness, and to grow closer to God. I hope this guide can help you make fasting a permanent part of your life.

—Jay Richards

“Fasting gives birth to prophets and strengthens the powerful; fasting makes lawgivers wise. Fasting is a good safeguard for the soul, a steadfast companion for the body, a weapon for the valiant, and a gymnasium for athletes. Fasting repels temptations, anoints unto piety; it is the comrade of watchfulness and the artificer of chastity. In war it fights bravely, in peace it teaches stillness.”

— ST. BASIL THE GREAT

CLEARING THE PATH

1. What is fasting?
2. Why should we distinguish fasting and abstinence?
3. What fasting patterns did early Christians follow? What led them to make fasting such a big part of their spiritual life?
4. Why did individual and corporate fasting (mostly) die out among Christians?
5. Why does the standard American diet (SAD) make fasting much harder than it needs to be?
6. Why does Richards argue that using fat for fuel and becoming “metabolically flexible” are key for the fasting lifestyle?
7. What is the theological reason for pondering both the physical *and* spiritual benefits of fasting?

WEEK ONE

1. How much have you fasted before? Regularly? Every so often? Only a few times? Never?
2. Are you finding it hard to fire up your fat-burning metabolism? Could you explain to a stranger why this is important for the fasting lifestyle?
3. What is the myth of Freudian “urges”? How does it relate to the need to discipline our bodies and souls?
4. Christ has already died to save us from our sins. So, why is it still important for us to make sacrifices such as fasting?
5. If fasting offers spiritual and physical benefits, how can it also be a sacrifice?
6. What is “redemptive suffering”? Did you realize how many Scripture passages describe it?
7. Do you think the lack of holiness in the Church is due, in part, to the loss of serious fasting among Christians?

WEEK TWO

1. How frequently do you tend to eat during the day? Are you a grazer?
2. Did you believe that frequent eating was good for you?

3. How hard do you find it to go sixteen hours without food?
4. Why have fasting and prayer so often gone together in Christian practice?
5. Do you have a consistent prayer routine?
6. What are your favorite prayers?
7. Have you ever prayed the Liturgy of the Hours? Why do you suppose it has endured for so many centuries?

WEEK THREE

1. How hard is it for you to go twenty hours without food? Have you done this in the past?
2. What is Gnosticism? Why does it devalue the body?
3. Why is fasting not an attack on the body?
4. Did you know about the fasting practices of St. Catherine of Siena? Are they a model for the average Christian faster?
5. What does it mean to fast *for* the body?
6. How is our belief in the resurrection of the body relevant to fasting?
7. Why is exercise important for a fasting lifestyle?

WEEK FOUR

1. How hard is it for you to limit your eating to one meal a day?
2. What physical and spiritual effects have you noticed so far?
3. Have you noticed greater mental clarity over the past four weeks?
4. Is there a connection between mental clarity and prayer?
5. How might fasting improve brain health?
6. Why does it matter that “mimicking” a fast can provide many of the benefits of a complete fast? How is a fasting-mimicking diet different from typical dieting?

WEEK FIVE

1. Is eating one tiny meal a day harder or easier than you would have imagined it to be six weeks ago?
2. What has been your experience of mini-feasts on Sunday? Has it changed your perspective on Sunday? Do you look forward to it? Does it make you want to gorge on food during the rest of the week? Or does it help reinforce your fasting schedule during the week?

3. Why do you think Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert before starting his earthly ministry?
4. Why would fasting increase the power of our prayers against Satan and demonic powers?
5. Have you ever thought that Jesus's long desert fast is a *model* for Christian spiritual practice?
6. Did you know that exorcists fast before exorcisms? Why do you think that is?
7. How often do you say prayers in resistance of spiritual warfare?
8. Do you think that our lack of fasting has contributed to the epidemic of obesity and diabetes?
9. Do you find it encouraging that medical science is now rediscovering the therapeutic uses of fasting? Is this good news for Christians? Could you explain to someone who hasn't read *Eat, Fast, Feast* how fasting can help treat type 2 diabetes and obesity?
10. What do you think about the possibility that fasting could help treat other diseases as well?
11. What is discordance? What do you make of the idea that our modern way of eating contradicts the original design plan for our bodies?

12. Does the idea of good stress make sense to you? Before reading this book, did you tend to think of all stress as bad?

WEEK SIX

1. Does the idea of a multi-day fast scare you? How long do you plan to fast this week?
2. During this study, have you been able to fast with friends, family, or a study group? Do you have plans for corporate fasting in the future? Would it be better if Western Christians still had detailed fasting mandates, as do Eastern Christians? What are some other ways to encourage corporate fasts with such mandates?
3. How does following the Christian liturgical calendar reinforce the fasting lifestyle?
4. Are there benefits to fasting that can only be gained in a corporate fast? Could the moral crises in today's Church be due, in part, to the loss of corporate fasting?
5. Did you know about Ember Days fasts before reading about them in this book? Why are they important?
6. Did you know that Advent used to be a time of preparation and fasting, like Lent? Why do you think most Christians have abandoned that?

7. Are you interested in trying a fast longer than seventy-two hours? Does that seem less daunting now than it would have before you started this study?
8. Has this reading helped you greater appreciate God's design of the human body? Why does Richards argue that the Darwinian process fails to account for its wonders? What *can* natural selection explain? How can the role of natural selection in human history help us decide what we should eat and what we should avoid?
9. What is your game plan for locking in a fasting lifestyle for the rest of your life?
10. Does fasting give you a fresh perspective on feasts? Why do you think we tend to retain feasts, but modify or drop the fasts that precede them?
11. Why do you think God wants us to set aside certain days and times for fasting and feasting, rather than treating every day the same?
12. What is "fractal" fasting and feasting? How does it differ from a strict repetitive pattern?
13. Had you ever noticed that Scripture begins with a sort of fast or abstinence and ends with a feast? Does the pattern of fasting and feasting cast new light on receiving the Eucharist?

14. What has most surprised you about this experience?
How has it changed you and your spiritual practices?

“Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, and kindles the true light of chastity.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE

EAT, FAST, FEAST: THE SIX-WEEK PLAN AT A GLANCE

Week One

Eat a “ketogenic” diet of high natural fat, moderate protein, and very low carbs (below fifty grams not counting fiber) without simple sugars, grains, or starches. Get about 80 percent of your calories from fat, 15 percent from protein, and 5 percent from carbohydrates. Think natural fats—such as olive and coconut oil—and fatty meats. For carbs, focus on green vegetables grown above ground—such as spinach, broccoli, and asparagus.

This way of eating allows your body to shift to a state of “ketosis,” in which it draws most of its energy from dietary and body fat.

Drink lots of water and increase your salt intake.

Have a mini-feast on Sunday: Enjoy a piece of fruit or some 85 percent dark chocolate.

Week Two

Start to restrict your feeding window to 16/8. That is, every day, fast for sixteen hours (including your night's sleep) and eat all your daily calories (mostly fat, protein, and vegetables) during an eight-hour feeding window.

Have a mini-feast on Sunday and expand your eating window to twelve hours.

Week Three

Lengthen your daily fast with a 20/4 routine. That is, eat all your meals within a four-hour window of time during the day. You don't need to try to restrict calories.

This way of eating helps break the habit of eating at fixed times and amplifies the good effects of the ketogenic diet.

Then, on Sunday, have another mini-feast.

Week Four

For three days this week—preferably Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—eat all your food during a one-hour window. You still don't need to try to restrict net calories. Maintain a time-

restricted ketogenic diet on other days. And enjoy a mini-feast on Sunday.

Week Five

Mimic a real fast on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Consume one-fourth the number of calories that you normally do—five hundred to six hundred calories. (Think two avocados with lime juice and salt.) Continue with a regular, time-restricted ketogenic diet on the other days. Plus another mini-feast day on Sunday.

Week Six

For the first few days of the week, prepare for a fast longer than twenty-four hours. Shoot for thirty-six to seventy-two hours. Then sometime on Wednesday through Saturday, observe your fast. By this time, you should be “fat-adapted” and much more metabolically flexible. You’ll have felt the benefits of fasting.

Enjoy a proper feast on Sunday.

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