

1

Fast

ESTHER 2-7



GOAL

By hearing the story of Queen Esther asking everyone to fast and pray, the children imagine how fasting might be something they could do.

- A** Art
- AM** Active/Movement
- C** Conversation
- D** Drama
- F** Food
- G** Game
- M** Music
- NS** Nature/Science
- QC** Quiet/Contemplative
- S** Service
- T** Technology
- X** Extra Prep

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



PRAYER

Lord God, some things are harder to teach and to learn. Inspire my teaching that what we learn together will bring us closer to you. Amen.

THIS SESSION

Fasting is typically thought of as refraining from food for a period of time in order to focus on something other than the food. Sometimes fasting is part of a lifestyle choice, sometimes an act of protest, and sometimes a religious practice. Some people fast personally, and some people fast in community. Fasting can also be abstaining from an activity. The purpose of fasting as a spiritual discipline is to use the fast, the time and intention away from something significant, to draw closer to God.

THE BIBLE STORY

The compelling story of Esther is one of a young queen, a wise uncle, a pompous king, and a nasty villain. Taking place in Persia, Esther and her people are foreigners, Jewish, taken captive sometime before this story; but they have not lost their identity as followers of God. Haman, the villain, wants to get rid of the Jewish people because Mordecai, Esther's uncle, refuses to bow down to Haman. Mordecai discovers Haman's plan and begs his niece Esther to intervene. Esther, wise and faith-filled, asks Mordecai to have all the Jewish people fast and pray for three days. Esther is inspired and has a plan that not only saves her people but gets rid of the evil Haman. Fasting prepared Esther to do a very hard and risky task. The collective fast focused the community and Esther on discerning God's will.

CONNECTIONS WITH CHILDREN

Probably one of the ways children have heard of or tried fasting is during the season of Lent when they or friends may have "given up something for Lent." Many children probably don't understand what the intention is or that this is a spiritual practice of fasting. Giving up something for Lent, which was typically a practice in Catholic communities, is abstaining from something to focus on God during that time or that hunger for something.

Fasting from food, especially with children, should never be done lightly or for long periods of time. Conversations about fasting from food also need to be sensitive to food scarcity and food insecurity. To go without a meal may be a privilege and not a choice.

SESSION PREPARATION

- "Spiritual Discipline Journals" (p. 8): Obtain a journal or notebook for each child, and a few extras for children who attend subsequent sessions. Children will use their journals each session of this unit.
- Depending on the options you choose:
 - "Fasting Choices" (p. 10): Obtain a 16 oz. plastic cup and fourteen large craft sticks for each child.



GETTING STARTED

- Notebooks
- Magazines
- Scissors
- Glue sticks



The Spiritual Discipline journals will be used in each session of this unit. Keep journals in the room from session to session. Have extra journals on hand to give to children who may not have attended this session.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE JOURNALS



As children arrive, welcome them and give them a notebook to use as a journal. Tell the children that they will use their journal for each session of this unit to consider various spiritual disciplines. Invite the children to make a collage in their journal of foods they like, using pictures and words from magazines. Provide magazines, scissors, and glue sticks. Tell the children that they can use letters to spell words if they can't find a picture of a food they like. Assist with spelling as needed.

Invite children to share their collages, naming their favorite foods. Have the children put their name on their journal. Set aside journals for "More than Food" (p. 11) or for session 2.

DRAWING NEAR TO GOD



The opening ritual is a responsive litany with one line changing to correspond to the spiritual discipline in each session. The motions help children learn their responses, which are printed in the bold text and remain the same throughout the unit.

Draw near to God

and God (*raise both arms to the sky*)

will draw near to us. (*bring hands toward heart, crossing them over your heart*)

When we fast, we free up space to ponder God's goodness.

Let us (*extend arms forward, palms facing upward*)

keep company (*bend elbows and bring together hands in prayer*)

with Jesus. (*sign "Jesus" using right middle finger touching the middle of left palm, repeat with left middle finger touching the middle of right palm*)



INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

- Newsprint, marker

WHAT IS FASTING?



Ask the children what a *homonym* is. Explain, if necessary, that it is two or more words that have the same sound but different meanings. Tell them that the word *fast* is a homonym. Wonder together what the different meanings are for the word *fast*. Write ideas on a sheet of newsprint. Some suggestions may be: speedy or quick; ahead of time (my watch is fast); secure, tight, or attached; loyal (fast friends); wild or extravagant (living a fast life); hard to wake up (fast asleep); abstain from something, usually food; and a period of abstaining from something, usually food. Ask the children if they have ever fasted from food. Tell them that they all fast each night from the time they have dinner or a night-time snack until the next morning when they *break* their fast with breakfast! Write *breakfast* on the newsprint to show the children the word. Suggest that, while fasting overnight is refraining from eating, choosing to fast has a different intention.

Tell the children that fasting, abstaining from something, is a spiritual discipline and can draw us closer to God. Write the words *disciple* and *discipline* on the newsprint. Comment that we often think of *discipline* as something negative, usually associated with punishment. Tell the children that the two words come from the same origin meaning “to learn.” A disciple is someone who learns from another, and discipline is an activity or experience that provides training or learning. Suggest that spiritual disciplines are those things that help us train to be disciples, to practice being a follower of Jesus.

Wonder together what people can fast from, writing suggestions on the newsprint, and how fasting can help us get closer to God. Explain that the practice of fasting asks four questions:

- What am I fasting from or giving up?
- How long is the fast?
- What is the purpose of the fast?
- What will I do instead during the fast?

On another sheet of newsprint, make four columns and write those four questions each as a heading. Suggest that giving up sweets for a month and eating vegetables instead in order to be healthy is a good thing. It is a healthy lifestyle but not a spiritual discipline. To be a spiritual discipline, the purpose should be to grow closer to God or to learn more about being a follower of Jesus. Wonder how changing the purpose of the fast might help us with what to do during the fast. Set aside the newsprint for “More than Food” (p. 11).



FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

ESTHER'S PREPARATION

Tell the children that there are many examples of people fasting in the Bible. Explain that sometimes individuals, such as a prophet or Jesus, would fast to focus on God or to seek God's guidance. The prophets and Jesus also talked about fasting and not doing it for show but for the right reasons. Explain that there were also times when a community would fast, such as when the Jewish people were taken into captivity and sought God's presence, or when believers in the early church were choosing people to go tell others about Jesus. Tell the children that one story about a faith community fasting is when Esther, a young Jewish woman, was made queen, and she had to do a very brave thing.

Read aloud the Bible story based on Esther 2–7 on Resource Page 1 or invite volunteers to take turns reading a paragraph at a time using copies of Resource Page 1. Wonder together about the story using the following prompts:

- How do you think Esther felt coming to the palace?
- Why did Uncle Mordecai warn her to not tell them she was Jewish?
- Why do you think Esther asked her people to fast and pray with her?
- How did fasting and praying help Esther and the people?
- Have you ever been part of an experience where a community fasted together? If so, what was that like?
- What do you think might be a reason our church could fast and pray together?

C

Resource Page 1 (one or several copies)



FINDING THE PRACTICE ALL AROUND US

Choose one or both options.

- Internet-connected device

LEARNING ABOUT LENT



Ask the children what they know about the season in the church year called *Lent*. If necessary, explain that it is a period of forty days before Easter. Show the YouTube video “Everything You Need to Know before Lent” (bit.ly/FMBeforeLent, 3:39). After the video, invite children to turn to a neighbor and explain two new things they learned about Lent. After about a minute, ask the children to share with the group what they learned. Wonder together about the connection between fasting and Lent.

- Internet-connected device

FASTING IN OTHER FAITH TRADITIONS



Tell the children that other faith communities also practice fasting. Share some information about several faith traditions:

- Jewish people practice fasting on the holiest day of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, a day of repentance. Fasting is a part of this day so that food is not a distraction from focusing on God.
- Buddhists are vegetarian, meaning that they don’t eat meat, eggs, or fish because they don’t believe you should kill any living thing. As a lifestyle, they fast or refrain from those foods. They also give up a meal or more to give that food or money to those who need food.
- Muslim people, those of the Islamic faith, fast during their holy month of Ramadan. They do not eat between sunrise and sunset in order to worship Allah (their name for God) and turn away from worldly activities to focus on their faith.

Wonder together what is similar and what is different among different faith traditions’ practices of fasting. Then show a video of a Muslim boy’s first fast, the YouTube video “Best Ramadan Stories—Children’s Ramadan Fasting Campaign—Muslim Kids TV” (bit.ly/FMFirstRamadanFast, 5:29). Discuss:

- ✦ What do you think would be the hardest part of fasting?
- ✦ What would be the hardest thing for you to give up?
- ✦ How do you think fasting would help you think more about God?



PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or both options.

- Plastic cups
- Two adhesive labels for each child
- Markers
- Copies of Resource Page 2
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Fourteen large craft sticks for each child

FASTING CHOICES



Tell the children they are going to make a tool to help them try fasting, to give up something for a certain period of time and fill up some of that time with an activity that spends time with God. Give each child a plastic cup, two adhesive labels, and markers. Have them choose two colors of markers, and with one marker, write GIVE UP on a label, and with the other marker, write FILL UP on the other label. Have them put their labels on their cup. They can put them on opposite sides or the same side. If on the same side, GIVE UP should be above FILL UP.

Hand out copies of Resource Page 2 and invite the children to decorate the strips as they choose. Give each child fourteen large craft sticks. Tell the children to make a mark on both ends and both sides of seven of the large craft sticks with the color marker they used for their GIVE UP label and to do the same with the other seven large craft sticks with the color marker they used for their FILL UP label. Then have the children cut out the GIVE UP strips and glue them to one side of the large craft sticks that are designated as the GIVE UP color. Have them do the same with the FILL UP strips.

Tell the children that they can put their sticks in their cup. Suggest that, each day, they pull out a GIVE UP stick and a FILL UP stick and do what each stick says to do. Encourage them to involve their family in this practice as well, having older siblings and parents/caregivers choose items to give up that are appropriate for them. Set aside cups for “Blessing Our Fast” (below).

MORE THAN FOOD



Give the children their Spiritual Discipline journals and invite them to add pictures of things other than favorite foods that they might fast, or refrain, from for a period of time. Brainstorm together if necessary. Ideas might be screen time, video games, or toys, or it might be an attitude of selfishness, anger, or jealousy. Children may look for pictures or words in magazines, draw pictures, or write words in their journals.

After some time to work on their pictures or words, have the children turn to a new double-page spread and have them make a chart in their journals like the one on the newsprint from “What Is Fasting?” (p. 8), with four columns and each of the four questions as headings. As a group, choose something to fast from as an example and fill out the chart on the newsprint together. Talk about a reasonable amount of time to fast, why we are fasting (may be personal reasons or a community endeavor), and what we might do while fasting to focus on God.

Invite the children to look at their pictures, both food and more than food, choose something to fast from, and write it in their chart. Help them be realistic in how they answer each question. Assist with writing as necessary. Have the children share their fasting ideas with the group and make refinements as needed. Encourage the children to try their fasting idea in the coming days and report back next session. Set aside the Spiritual Discipline journals for “Blessing Our Fast” (below).

- Spiritual Discipline journals from “Spiritual Discipline Journals” (p. 8)
- Magazines
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Markers and crayons
- Newsprint from “What Is Fasting?” (p. 8)



FOLLOWING JESUS

BLESSING OUR FAST



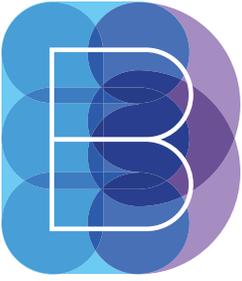
Invite each child to hold their fasting cup and/or Spiritual Discipline journal in their left hand and place their right hand over it like a roof. Have them repeat after you as you lead them in a blessing:

Lord, we bring our (*cups or journals*) to you /
 as we try the practice of fasting in the coming days. /
 Accept our (*cups or journals*) as a token of our love and devotion /
 and our desire to grow closer with you. /
 Amen. /

- Cups from “Fasting Choices” (p. 10) and/or Spiritual Discipline journals from “More than Food” (above)



Have the children take home their fasting cups but leave their Spiritual Discipline journals in the room for the next session. Before leaving the room, have the children review their fasting plan in their journal if they made one.



BIBLE STORY

BASED ON ESTHER 2-7

Long, long ago, the Jewish people had been captured and moved to the land called Persia. They lived there many years. Esther was a young Jewish woman there. When her parents died, her cousin Mordecai adopted her and cared for her like his own daughter or niece.

One day, the king sent his servants to find the most beautiful woman to be his queen. Many young women were brought to the palace, and Esther was one of them. Mordecai warned her not to tell anyone she was Jewish. Even though the Jewish people had lived in Persia a long time, some people did not like them.

When Esther arrived at the palace, the king thought she was beautiful and made her his queen. Every day, Mordecai came to the palace to check on Esther.

Haman, one of the king's officials, thought he was very important, so he ordered all of the king's servants to bow down to him. Everyone did this except Mordecai. Mordecai told the king's servants, "I am not Persian. I am Jewish. That is why I cannot bow down to Haman." This made Haman very angry. He told the king that the Jewish people were not obeying the king's laws. Haman said that all the Jewish people should be destroyed. The king agreed, and a decree was sent across the country.

Mordecai sent word to Esther about this decree, asking her to change the king's mind. In that time, anyone who talked to the king without being invited could be killed. Esther was scared to go to the king uninvited, but Mordecai told her that perhaps she was made queen at this time so that she might save her people. Esther asked Mordecai to have all her people, the Jewish people, fast and pray for three days and three nights. She and her servants would do the same. Esther did this to seek God's guidance and to be brave to do something very hard and risky.

After three days of fasting and praying and seeking God's guidance, Esther knew what to do. She went to the king. He was not angry at her. In fact, he was so happy to see her, he told her he would give her anything she wanted. She said she wanted to have a special dinner for the king and Haman. They came to dinner, and again the king said he would give her whatever she wanted. And again Esther invited the king and Haman to another special dinner. This time when the king said he would give her anything she wanted, she was ready.

"I want you to save me and my people, the Jewish people, from their enemy. That is my only wish."

"Who is this enemy?" the king asked, and Esther pointed to Haman.

The king declared that all the Jewish people should be spared. With the help of her people seeking God's guidance, Queen Esther saved her people.

GIVE UP

FILL UP

SWEETS and TREATS, 1 day	Memorize: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” —1 Corinthians 10:31
ARGUING, 2 days	Memorize: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” —Joshua 1:9
TV, 1 day	Read, or have someone read with you: Colossians 3:12–17
VIDEO GAMES, 1 day	Read, or have someone read with you: Psalm 100
COMPLAINING, 2 days	Write or draw a prayer to God: What can you thank God for?
TOYS, 1 day	Pray: Praise God! Tell God you’re sorry for doing wrong. Thank God for your blessings. Ask God for what you need.
_____ (your choice), 1 day	Sing or listen to: Your favorite Sunday school or church song

