

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry” (Matthew 4:1-2).

The spiritual practice of fasting predates Christianity, with many examples found in the Old Testament and in other ancient religions. In that more universal sense, the practice of denying ourselves simple pleasures or even basic necessities for a period of time serves the purpose of spiritual exercise or purification, disciplining our desires and wills to live according to the higher principles of the soul rather than the base desires of the flesh, as we see in Jesus’ forty day fast at the beginning of his public ministry.

Another ancient purpose for fasting is as an act of atonement for sin and as a sign of repentance. We see this, for example, in the fast called by the king of Nineveh in the book of Jonah (3:6-9). Moved by the warning of Jonah, the Ninevites fasted in sackcloth and ashes, and God, moved by their act of repentance, repented himself of the destruction he had planned for them. Renouncing the pleasures of the flesh becomes a sign of renouncing our sinful ways and returning to the Lord.

Both of these meanings characterize our fasting during the season of Lent. By our forty day fast, we discipline ourselves to reject the base desires of the flesh and to live according to the higher principles of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, we are atoning for the many ways in which we have rejected the principles of God’s Kingdom and chosen to live according to the flesh and offer our fasting as a sign of repentance and of our desire to return to the Lord. Finally, and most importantly, we do all of this by uniting our fast to that of Christ and so draw more closely to him who is our atonement and the way to the kingdom.

This Lent, reflect on why we fast, and then enter into your Lenten fast in a spirit of self-discipline, repentance, and communion with Christ.