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# Gaining by denying: The benefit of Christian fasting

## —Part 1 of 2

**F**asting is a spiritual discipline mentioned numerous times in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The practice continued with the early Christians.<sup>1</sup> Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley encouraged regular fasting.<sup>2</sup> Adventist pioneers including James and Ellen White also advocated fasting.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, we do not hear today about the spiritual discipline of fasting unless it is in the context of times of distress or desire for revival.

Some may shy away from fasting due to misuses of the discipline or in an attempt to distance themselves from the legalistic ritual attached to fasting as proof of piety. Others do not feel the need to take part in what they consider antiquated customs or maneuverings for God's grace. In addition, fasting does not fit into our modern desire to compartmentalize the sacred and the secular. Yet, when we approach fasting as a way in which to deeply connect with the Creator of the universe, it brings with it great joy and spiritual renewal. The aim of this two-part article is to present a biblical view of fasting and demonstrate how and why it should be a part of every believer's individual and corporate Christian experience.

### The biblical meaning of "fasting"

The Old Testament uses four main words to denote fasting.<sup>4</sup> The most common of these is *tsowm*, used 26 times, and its cognate *tsuwm*, used 21 times. Each time these words are used in the context of temporarily denying oneself food. Fasts described with this word are usually declared by humans to beseech God's favor (Ezra 8:21), show repentance (Jon. 3:5), and/or as a sign of mourning (2 Sam. 1:12).

Another Hebrew word, *nazar*, translated in Zechariah 7:3 as "fast" (NIV), "abstain" (ESV), or "separating" (KJV), has been used ten times in the Bible. This word carries the sense of permanent or long-term separating and consecrating oneself for the sake of holiness. This term is most notably used (four out of the ten times) in respect to Nazarite vows (Num. 6:2–6).

The fourth word, *anah*, meaning "to afflict or humble," is sometimes used in the context of denying oneself through fasting. Two prominent examples of this use are in connection with the fast of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 23:27–32 and David's intercessory prayer and fasting in Psalm 35:13.

From consideration of these four terms, we can conclude that fasting in the Old Testament indicates a temporary denial of food and humbling

of oneself before God to show great sorrow or to seek God's favor.

The New Testament uses three Greek words, all from the same root, to indicate fasting: *nēsteuō* (used 21 times), *nēsteia* (8 times), and *nēstis* (2 times).<sup>5</sup> These can be literally translated as "not eating," yet the context tells us that these words are used to refer to a ritual or religious practice.<sup>6</sup> For many during the New Testament times, fasting had become more of a ritual to show piety or habit than a way in which to draw closer to God (Luke 18:10–12). There was no joy in their fasting, evidenced by the chastisement Jesus gave to those who intentionally brought attention to their fasting (Matt. 6:16–18).

Jesus and the first-century church promoted fasting with a purpose. For Jesus, fasting was an intimate, personal experience with God, done individually or collectively, to build up strength in spiritual warfare (Matt. 4:2; Mark 9:29). The early church continued fasting in this manner and also fasted when committing church leaders to the Lord (Acts 14:23).

### What fasting is

In the Bible fasting was denying oneself food and drink to focus on spiritual growth (Matt. 17:21; Acts 9:9), prayer (Dan. 9:3), consecration (Acts

13:3; 14:23), deliverance (Esther 4:16; Ps. 109:24), corporate festivals (Lev. 23:26–32), resolution of conflict (Judg. 20:26), repentance (Deut. 9:18; Jon. 3:5), mourning (2 Sam. 1:12; 1 Chron. 10:12), supplication (Joel 1:14; 2 Sam. 12:16), or seeking God’s will (Acts 13:2).

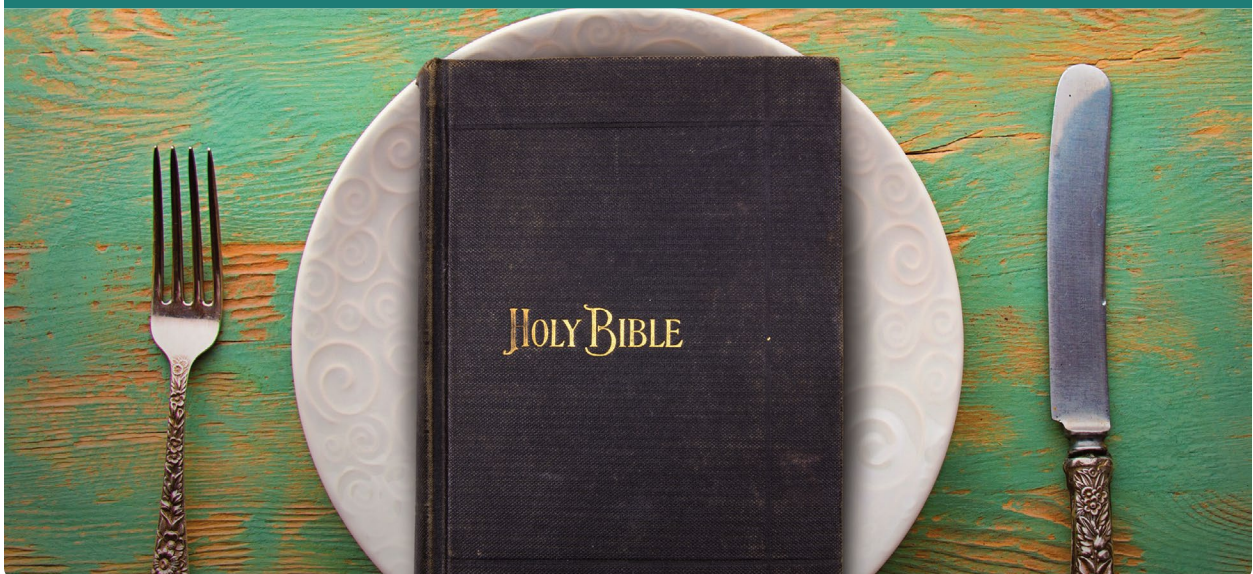
Fasting is seen in the Bible, not merely as an individual practice but,

individual fasts remained more common than corporate ones in both the Old and New Testaments.

While fasting usually refers to refraining from food and drinks (may not include water) for a specific period of time, some individuals may seek for a higher definition for fasting. Such Christians would define fasting as

In *The Upward Call*, one pastor refers to fasting as “blessed subtraction,” noting that the aim is to give up something—not necessarily a bad something—for the purpose of drawing closer to God.<sup>10</sup> I (Kristy) regularly set aside a block of time each year for a limited fast (anywhere from 3 to 40 days). When fasting I not only deny myself

*Fasting takes our attention away from ourselves and redirects it to heaven.*



also as a corporate exercise by the whole nation or a faith community. National days of fasting other than the Day of Atonement, which was a fast declared by God for the nation, were rare for the preexilic Israelites. Days of fasting were called as part of mourning a death, as was done by Israel after the death of King Saul (1 Chron. 10:11, 12), or in times of great crisis, famine, and invasion (Joel 1:14; 2 Chron. 20:3). National fast days increased during the postexilic period<sup>8</sup> to commemorate the destruction of the temple and the events leading to the exile.<sup>9</sup> However,

going beyond abstinence from food and drinks to include what they may consider to be lifestyle habits that may interfere with the ultimate goal of fasting, which includes a higher walk with God, a total devotion of time and thought to a closer communion with God, a fuller development of spiritual life, and fulfillment of a specific goal in the life of the individual or the faith community. Today such non-dietary items may include social media, shopping, sleep, sports, sex, or any other activity that may distract one from fully focusing on God.

something but also add something else. For example, by “fasting” from my usual wake-up time, I will get up one hour early and use that hour for extended quiet time and deeper devotionals. When the cravings for certain food items are felt, that becomes a trigger to pray for God’s blessing and guidance or to thank Him. It “is like tying a ribbon around your finger to remember God.”<sup>11</sup> A spirit of rejuvenation accompanies such periods of fasting.

Fasting without focusing on God means that we merely miss a diet. “The purpose is to notice the

false, non-life-giving things that [we are] attached to. And to purposely attempt to attach to the ways of God.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore the purpose of fasting is to enhance our relationship with God and go deeper in our prayer life. “When we fast, we are invited to feast on Jesus, the bread of life. . . . Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on Him and on doing His will.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus, the Bread of Life and Gift from heaven, sufficiently satisfies our needs and leads to eternal life (John 6:32–48). Psalm 63:1–5 demonstrates that seeking after God wholeheartedly and praising Him will lead to a satisfaction that no food can bring. “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. . . . I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you” (vv. 1, 5).<sup>14</sup>

Ellen White encourages believers to fast, seeing abstaining from food as a way in which to focus on spiritual growth. “Men [and women] need to think less about what they shall eat and drink, of temporal food, and much more in regard to the food from heaven, that will give tone and vitality to the whole religious experience.”<sup>15</sup> This is the motivation when my (Joseph’s) wife Denise observes regular fasting. For her, scheduled fasting is about asking God for nothing more than a deeper connection to Him. The hunger she finds for God and the closeness to Him that she feels while fasting carry her through long after her fast has ended. Everyone can temporarily give up something in order to draw closer to God. By choosing to go against our human desires, we are allowing space for personal and spiritual growth. “Fasting helps to discipline the self-indulgent and slothful will which is so reluctant to serve the Lord, and it helps to humiliate and chasten the flesh.”<sup>16</sup> Fasting takes our attention away from ourselves and redirects it to heaven.

### What fasting is not

Fasting, as a spiritual discipline, has at times been misunderstood or used

in ways contrary to the will to God. In order to understand what fasting is, it is prudent to also look at what fasting is not.

*Coercion*—Fasting is not about twisting God’s arm. It is not some kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. God explains this in Isaiah 58: “ ‘ “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high’ ” (vv. 3, 4). Any pious intent was overshadowed by their lack of justice and compassion due to the evilness in their hearts (see Zech. 7:4–13). Their acts of fasting were not practiced in conjunction with the humbling of their hearts. Instead, their intentions were to force God into an action that the people did not merit. “They fasted merely to gain favor with God and to secure His approval of their evil deeds, as if abstention from food was of more importance in God’s sight than abstention from iniquity!”<sup>17</sup>

Attitude is everything when it comes to fasting. A group of more than 40 Jews in Acts 23:12–15 resolved to fast until they were successful in their conspiracy to kill Paul. They were not desiring God’s will, but their own selfish gain. Fasting is supposed to change us, not God.

*Penance*—God’s forgiveness of our sins comes with no requirement except confession and repentance (1 John 1:9). There was a time in church history, however, when fasting was “linked with a legalistic theology and the concept of meritorious works.”<sup>18</sup> This nonbiblical idea used fasting as a way in which to prove to God that one is worthy of forgiveness and to punish oneself. This false view of fasting has carried through to some corners of contemporary Christianity. There are those who undertake fasting as a way to punish the body for sinning or to force it into compliance. Fasting as penance

does not mean the same thing as the biblical concept of fasting for repentance (Jon. 3:5–9).<sup>19</sup> Repentance is the sign of a contrite heart and the desire to turn from sin, while penance is a self-inflicted punishment for the purpose of gaining God’s favor. Penance focuses on one’s selfish past; repentance focuses on one’s God-filled future.

Therefore, we should not deprive ourselves of food to punish ourselves to gain favor with God. We already have God’s favor through Jesus. “And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24; cf. 5:1).

### The purpose and benefits of fasting

Fasting is a discipline that is both physical and spiritual, building our faith muscles so that we can withstand the bigger contests that come our way. Fasting is more than just a spiritual training in self-control. Throughout Christian history, people have shared their positive spiritual experiences with fasting and its role in maintaining a balanced life.<sup>20</sup> One primary biblical reason to fast is to develop a closer walk with God and acknowledge our need for Him. We see this in the fast of the people of Nineveh marking their repentance (Jon. 3). By taking our eyes off the things of this world, we can focus better on Christ. An awareness of our physical needs reminds us of our spiritual needs. Jesus said: “ ‘ “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’ ” ” (Matt. 4:4). Fasting reminds us that we can get by without most things for a time, but we cannot get by without God.

Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses fasted for at least two recorded 40-day periods (Exod. 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 10:10). Jesus fasted 40 days (Matt. 4:2) and reminded His followers to fast: “when you fast,” not, if you fast (Matt. 6:16). David fasted for 7 days (2 Sam. 12:16–18); Mordecai, Esther, and her maidens fasted for 3 days (Esther 4:16); and the whole nation fasted on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:26–32).

Following are some biblical examples of why people fasted.<sup>21</sup>

- Fasting, combined with prayer, is a means that can be used to seek and find a more joyful, intimate relationship with God. “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (Joel 2:12, 13).
- Fasting in the Bible is used as a way to humble oneself before God (1 Sam. 7:6; Ezra 8:21). David said, “I humbled myself with fasting” (Ps. 35:13).
- Fasting allows the Holy Spirit to work in you, showing you the “true spiritual condition [of your heart], resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life”<sup>22</sup> (Deut. 8:3, 1 Kings 21:27).
- Fasting transforms your prayer life into a more meaningful and personal worship experience (Luke 2:37, 38; Col. 3:17).
- Fasting can give you courage to do what is right in times of distress. Esther fasted, and asked those around her to fast, as she prepared to visit the king without being called. Such a visit could have cost her life, but it instead saved her people (Esther 4:16).
- Fasting and ministry go hand-in-hand. Jesus fasted at the start of His earthly ministry (Luke 4:1, 2). Paul fasted immediately after his Damascus road encounter (Acts 9:9). Elijah fasted to once again hear the voice of God (1 Kings 19:8). Prayer and fasting were part of the laying on of hands before sending out missionaries and appointing elders in the early church (Acts 13:3; 14:23). Prophets often fasted on behalf of their people (Dan. 9:1–19). “Then Ezra . . . ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to

mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles” (Ezra 10:6).

Fasting and prayer are strongly linked together in the Bible (Luke 2:37; 5:33).<sup>23</sup> When you fast, you will find yourself being humbled. You will discover more time to pray and seek God’s face. As He leads you to recognize and repent of unconfessed sin, you will experience special blessings from God.

## From fasting to feasting

The Bible presents fasting as something that is good, profitable, and beneficial. Fasting is not about a lack of food or depriving the body but rather a refocusing away from this world and feasting on the things of God. “Fasting is an exceptional measure, designed to channel and express our desire for God and our holy discontent in a fallen world. It is for those not satisfied with the status quo. For those who want more of God’s grace. For those who feel truly desperate for God.”<sup>24</sup> Fasting acknowledges our commitment to enhance our relationship with Him and helps us gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God.

Part 2 will appear in the September 2016 issue of *Ministry*. 📖

- 1 The Book of Acts has at least four references to fasting as a spiritual act: Acts 10:30; 13:2; 14:23; and 27:9. In chapter 8 of the second-generation Christian work known as *The Didache*, believers are told to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. *The Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, trans. Tim Sauder, accessed January 14, 2016, [www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Didache-text.html](http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Didache-text.html).
- 2 See Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Good Works Together With the Letter of Dedication,” trans. and eds. Adolph Spaeth, L. D. Reed, Henry E. Jacobs, et al., accessed January 14, 2016, [www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/work-04.txt](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/work-04.txt); John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion” 12:18, trans. and ed. Henry Beveridge, accessed January 14, 2016, [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xiii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xiii.html); and John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse Seven,” eds. Ryan N. Danker and George Lyons, accessed January 14, 2016, [wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-27-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mountain-discourse-seven](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-27-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mountain-discourse-seven).
- 3 Both part 1 and part 2 of this article will provide details regarding the Whites’ views and experiences with fasting.

- 4 Word counts taken from the Hebrew lexicon as related to Strong’s H6684, H6685, H5144, and H6031 at Blue Letter Bible, [www.blueletterbible.org/](http://www.blueletterbible.org/), accessed January 16, 2016.
- 5 Word counts taken from the Greek lexicon as related to Strong’s G3521, G3522, and G3523 at Blue Letter Bible.
- 6 Friedrich S. Rothenberg in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1975), s.v. “Fast.”
- 7 Some manuscripts as used in the King James Version and New King James Version of the Bible note that Cornelius fasted in Acts 10:30 for this same purpose.
- 8 *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT), 1890.
- 9 The fasts of the fifth and seventh months, as kept during the 70 years of exile (Zech. 7:5), were two such fasts. John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 94.
- 10 Wesley D. Tracy, E. Dee Freeborn, Janine Tartaglia, and Morris A. Weigelt, *The Upward Call: Spiritual Formation and the Holy Life* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 95.
- 11 Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 11.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 13 Dallas Willard as quoted in Jan Johnson, *Simplicity & Fasting*, *Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 30.
- 14 Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses come from the New International Version.
- 15 Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938), 90.
- 16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1959; repr., New York: Touchstone for Simon & Schuster, 1995), 169.
- 17 “Isaiah” in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, revised, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), 306.
- 18 Robert D. Linder in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v. “Fast, Fasting.”
- 19 Biblical repentance has its roots in the concept of turning away from sin and turning towards God. Fritz Laubach in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, s.v. “metamelomai”; and “בָּנִי־שׁ,” TWOT, 2340.
- 20 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 56.
- 21 This list is partially inspired by Campus Crusade for Christ International, “Why You Should Fast,” accessed January 12, 2016, [www.cru.org/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/personal-guide-to-fasting.2.html](http://www.cru.org/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/personal-guide-to-fasting.2.html).
- 22 Campus Crusade for Christ International, “Why You Should Fast.”
- 23 Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 94.
- 24 David Mathis, “Sharpen Your Affections with Fasting,” June 4, 2014, [www.desiringgod.org/articles/sharpen-your-affections-with-fasting](http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/sharpen-your-affections-with-fasting).

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