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# Gaining by denying: An invitation to the discipline of fasting—Part 2 of 2

The first part of this article (July 2016) dealt with the biblical meaning and benefits of fasting and how fasting can deepen one's relationship with God when done in conjunction with close fellowship with Jesus. This part of the article invites you to share in the joys of fasting as we discuss *why* and *how* to undertake a fast.

Fasting is to be done in a spirit of humility and joy. Throughout the Bible, God rebuked Israel for their misplaced views on fasting. Rather than being a way to humble oneself before the Creator, fasting “came to be regarded as pious achievement.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus corrected this view, teaching, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6:16–18).<sup>2</sup>

We find that it was customary during Jesus' time to undertake fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, which were busy market days. To see those who fasted deliberately modify their

appearance in order to play up their piety for the crowds was not uncommon. They did not partake in the usual grooming habits and even used cosmetics to give the impression of paleness; their attempt to exaggerate humility was in fact an exhibition of pride and pretentiousness.<sup>3</sup> Ellen White warns against such pretension: “Fasting or prayer that is actuated by a self-justifying spirit is an abomination in the sight of God.”<sup>4</sup> Just as with any spiritual custom or discipline, fasting, in itself, does not bring one into righteousness; only the opening of the heart and surrendering of the will to God will bring forth a saving relationship with Christ.

## Why fast?

Why should we fast? Below is a list of several instances, biblical and otherwise, when God's people chose to fast. These can help us determine situations when we may benefit from prayer and fasting.

Fasting can be an integral part of one's spiritual journey. Hull calls this type of fasting one that “intensely nourish[es] . . . [the] soul.”<sup>5</sup> We see this in the life of Jesus when the Spirit led Him into the wilderness to prepare Him for ministry (Matt. 4:1, 2; Luke 4:1, 2). Paul also fasted after experiencing

Christ in vision and seeing his need for personal revival (Acts 9:9). Both Jesus and Paul spent a great deal of time in bringing revival to others. One Christian writer describes her prayer and fasting as a way in which to speed up her Christian growth. She says, fasting “tenderizes my heart toward the Lord. My spirit becomes all the more sensitive to his promptings, his voice, his touch.”<sup>6</sup>

Fasting prepares the way for the Holy Spirit to work in us to overcome sin (Matt. 4:4). Says the prophet Isaiah: “‘Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?’” (Isa. 58:6). Fasting can show us things that we have ignored in our lives. “Without our usual comforts, we turn to God with much more honesty and intensity. There we connect with the richness of God, who truly meets our needs.”<sup>7</sup>

Fasting is often undertaken before making important decisions or major life events. Look at Esther. Before she could dare risk her life in her mission to save her people, she turned to fasting and prayer (Esther 4:16). Likewise, we, too, can turn to fasting and prayer when faced with momentous decisions, such as when looking for a new pastor,

when deciding on a building project, or when launching a major evangelistic campaign. Fasting can also be a part of personal decision-making moments, such as when looking for a new job, entering into a marriage relationship, or making a major move.

Fasting can help in facing or overcoming personal challenges and problems. When David was falsely criticized and accused, he turned to God in fasting and prayer. He sought to humble himself and pray for vindication rather than to retaliate (Pss. 35:13; 69:10; 109:24). As a pastor, I felt at times that I was being falsely accused or criticized. I would pray and fast for God to open my eyes to any legitimate criticism and vindicate me against any falsehoods. This brought me much peace and allowed me to stay focused on the mission of reaching people for Christ.

Fasting and prayer can be a means to express our deep sorrow and regret

over the unfaithfulness of God's people, like Ezra did when he sought for the community to repent and seek spiritual renewal (Ezra 10:6). Criticism becomes a common response when we feel slighted or at odds with those around us. James warns against the damage this can cause (James 3:6–10). Instead, we need to spend time in prayer and fasting, not only for those who have fallen away from God but also for us to have a more Christlike attitude. This will help us show love and mercy to those with whom we may differ, so that a new dynamic of Christian relationship takes over the community of faith.

Fasting plays a crucial role in intercessory prayer. Esther asked all the Jews in Susa to fast and pray as she faced the danger of going before the king to plead for her people (Esther 4:16). Nehemiah fasted and sought forgiveness on behalf of God's people (Neh. 1:4–11).

Fasting and prayer were involved in the selection process of early church leaders and their commission to public ministry as evidenced in the ordination of Barnabas and Paul and in the appointing of elders (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23). I have personally experienced the power of fasting and prayer in the electoral process of the church I pastored. I intentionally spent a great deal of time in prayer and fasting before the selection of the nominating committee and again when the nominating committee started its work. Our congregation had the best possible leadership team, and as a result, we had a healthy and lively church family.

Fasting and praying can open the gates of heaven to save God's people from persecution. Esther's case, as noted above, to save her people from Haman's plot is worth remembering (Esther 4:3). Wherever God's people are threatened, whenever the proclamation of the gospel faces persecution, fasting and prayer should be an appropriate involvement and response on the part of the Christian community.

Thus we may conclude that for people to fast when they are desperate for God to act is biblical. Fasting can bring a note of urgency to our prayers, though fasting does not always guarantee a favorable answer but "express[es] legitimate hope in the mercy of God."<sup>8</sup>

In effect, "Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God. . . . [It] is not only the spontaneous effect of a superior satisfaction in God; it is also a chosen weapon against every force that would take that satisfaction away."<sup>9</sup> Those who combine prayer with fasting are showing God that they are earnest in their pleas. Thus, fasting exists as "an outward expression of the person's inner total commitment and reliance on God's preserving and rescuing power."<sup>10</sup>

## How long to fast

How long should we fast? The Bible presents many examples of fasting for 40 days (Moses in Exod. 34:28, Elijah in 1 Kings 19:8, and Jesus in Luke 4:2).

## How to prepare for fasting

Genuine, Spirit-filled fasting calls for intentional preparation. Such fasting calls for the following as a minimum:

- Examine your motives (Isa. 58:3–7).
- Surrender your life fully to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior (Rom. 12:1, 2).
- Ask God to reveal your sins to you (Ps. 19:12).
- Confess your sins (1 John 1:9).
- Seek forgiveness from those you have offended (Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3, 4).
- Make restitution as the Holy Spirit leads (Matt. 5:23–26).
- Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18).
- Consult with your physician before beginning a fast of any length.

## What to do while fasting

- Pray (Dan. 9:3; Acts 14:23).
- Meditate on the Word of God (Ps. 1:1, 2; Col. 3:16).
- Meditate on the attributes of God: love, grace, wisdom, compassion, sovereignty (Pss. 48:9, 10; 103:1–13).
- Expect God to bless you and reveal Himself to you (Heb. 11:6).
- Do not underestimate spiritual opposition (Gal. 5:16, 17).
- Refuse to yield to your worldly nature (Rom. 12:1, 2).
- Exhibit an attitude of joy (Zech. 8:19; Matt. 6:17, 18).

A normal Jewish fast would cover daylight hours.<sup>11</sup> The corporate fast in Judges 20:26 is an example of a fast that lasted until evening.

Esther proclaimed a full fast for three days (Esther 4:16). We are not told how long Daniel's fast was in Daniel 9:3, but we know of a three-week partial fast undertaken by him (Dan. 10:2, 3). The duration and extent of our fast will often be dictated by the reason for which we are fasting.<sup>12</sup> Some people may fast once annually, while others may opt for one day in a week.

## Revival and fasting

The first book of Samuel provides an example of fasting in order to bring about a revival among God's people. Israel knew that they were in need of a spiritual reconversion, and they turned to God with repentance and fasting. Mere words were not enough; they fasted to show their sincerity.<sup>13</sup> "When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD'" (1 Sam. 7:6).

Following such biblical examples, early Adventists fasted and prayed for revival. Speaking to a group of Adventists in Colorado, Ellen White made this powerful statement: "It is your privilege to receive more of the Spirit of God, as you engage in fasting and earnest prayer. You need to accept the promises and assurances of God and walk out on them in faith. You need to learn how to present the truths of the Word to those around you in all their binding force and in all their encouragement, that the unconverted may feel the influence of the Spirit of God upon heart and mind and character."<sup>14</sup>

In a report to James White, Isaac Sanborn speaks of how fasting and prayer preceded a series of evangelistic meetings, resulting in the establishment of a new congregation: "For some time previous to my meetings here, the brethren observed every other Sabbath as a day of fasting and

prayer, for a revival of God's work in their own hearts, and for the conversion of their neighbors. Their prayers were most signally answered during our meetings. Six were baptized, and a church of twenty-two members was organized. Bro. Wm. H. Slown was ordained elder, under whose faithful watchcare we trust the Lord will build up and strengthen the little band. We had at the close of our meetings a great blessing in attending the ordinances. We also found that much prejudice had been removed from the minds of some, who we trust will soon find their place among the remnant."<sup>15</sup> For early Adventists, fasting brought about an increased sensitivity to God's leading and the desire to share God's love with sinners.

When I was pastoring a small church of about 40 members, I became intentional about prayer and fasting for our church to grow. My wife and I set aside every Monday for prayer and fasting, and I encouraged our members to join us as they could. With prayer, fasting, and active witnessing by both members and church leaders, leading to evangelistic outreach, the church membership grew from 40 to 500 in about eight years. Where there is prayer, active witnessing, and earnest fasting with a focus on church growth, the church will grow.

## Work up an appetite for God

Fasting is no occasion for self-pride—a characteristic of the Pharisees. Instead, true fasting in the biblical sense must lead to humility (Isa. 58:3) and a spiritual life marked with prayer and continual seeking of God's face. "Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that will never happen in any other way."<sup>16</sup> An increased awareness of the greatness of God and His love often accompanies the fasting experience. Worship is heightened, relationship with Christ becomes stronger, fellowship with one another becomes meaningful and

vital. As one author testifies, because of fasting and prayer, "the Word of God has become even more alive to me. My prayers are more meaningful and effective. Fasting has enabled me to experience an increased joy of the Lord and the power of His resurrection in a new way."<sup>17</sup> That is the reward of genuine fasting. 

- 1 Friedrich S. Rothenberg, "Fast," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1975), 612.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses are from the New International Version.
- 3 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 235.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 280.
- 5 Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*, The Navigators Reference Library (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 197.
- 6 Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 42.
- 7 Jan Johnson, *Simplicity & Fasting*, Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 33.
- 8 John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary series, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 21.
- 9 John Piper, *Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 17, 18.
- 10 Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "Go Fast," *Adventist Review*, September 13, 2001. <http://archives.adventistreview.org/2001-1537/story3.html>.
- 11 Robert D. Linder, "Fast, Fasting," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 438.
- 12 An in-depth discussion on the various types of food-based fasts, how they affect the body, and how to end an extended fast can be found in Baab, *Fasting*, 90–101.
- 13 Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Quest for Renewal* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 59.
- 14 Ellen G. White quoted in W. C. White, "Mrs. White's Visit to Boulder, Colorado," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 13, 1910, 9.
- 15 James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 10, 1866, 149.
- 16 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th ann. ed., (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 60.
- 17 Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, eds., *Fasting Can Change Your Life* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1998), 53, <http://pobmt.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Fasting%20Can%20Change%20Your%20Life%20-%20ETowns.pdf>.

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