

The Secret Benefit of Fasting

Article by

David Mathis

Executive Editor, desiringGod.org

We're prone to think of fasting in negative terms. It's understandable. Fasting is *abstaining*. It's *going without* food and drink, or some other otherwise good gift from God. Perhaps the reason so many of us fast so infrequently is because we think of fasting mainly as what we're going without rather than what we're getting.

But Christian fasting is not only going without. It is not simply abstaining. The goal of Christian fasting, in fact, is not *going without* but *getting*. Our abstaining always serves some greater end and purpose — some eventual gain, not loss. Christian fasting is abstaining *for the sake of some specific Christian purpose*, or it is not truly Christian.

Jesus did not waffle as to whether his church would fast. "When you fast," he said — not "if" ([Matthew 6:16–17](#)). "They will fast," he promised ([Matthew 9:15](#)). And so the early church fasted ([Acts 9:9](#); [13:2](#); [14:23](#)), and for two millennia Christians have fasted. And when we have done so in truly a Christian way, the end result has not been loss but gain. But in order for Christian fasting to become a spiritual feast, we have to rehearse its purpose and benefits.

Purpose in (Christian) Fasting

Fasting is freshly fashionable in many quarters today — which means Christians need to be all the more careful to take our cues on this subject from Jesus, and not popular culture. Just a generation ago, a growing number of voices were claiming that *fasting is bad for your health*. Now it's flipped. Today, more and more dieticians are preaching, "When done correctly, fasting can have beneficial physical effects" (*Celebration of Discipline*, 48). But what's the difference between fashionable fasting and Christian fasting?

The key difference is Christian purpose. We could say *Spiritual* purpose — with a capital S for the Holy Spirit. Not just spiritual as opposed to material, but Spiritual as opposed to natural. For Christians, an essential, irreducible aspect of *Christian* fasting is a Christian purpose. Whether it's strengthening earnest prayer ([Ezra 8:23](#); [Joel 2:12](#); [Acts 13:3](#)). Or seeking God's guidance ([Judges 20:26](#); [Acts 14:23](#)) or his deliverance or protection ([2 Chronicles 20:3–4](#); [Ezra 8:21–23](#)). Or humbling ourselves before him ([1 Kings 21:27–29](#); [Psalm 35:13](#)). Or expressing repentance ([1 Samuel 7:6](#); [Jonah 3:5–8](#)) or grief ([1 Samuel 31:13](#); [2 Samuel 1:11–12](#)) or concern for his work ([Nehemiah 1:3–4](#); [Daniel 9:3](#)). Or overcoming temptation and dedicating ourselves to him ([Matthew 4:1–11](#)). Or best of all, expressing love and devotion to him ([Luke 2:37](#)), and saying with our fast, "This much, O God, I want more of you." Without a Spiritual purpose, it's not Christian fasting. It's just going hungry.

Benefits of (Christian) Fasting

Christians might fast for dietary reasons and for the various physical benefits nutritionists now highlight. But dietary goals aren't what make fasting *Christian*. Rather, what *Spiritual* fruit might we receive from God in response to our purposeful Christian fasting? How does God reward faith-filled fasting?

That Christian fasting is rewarding is plain, in the words of Christ himself, in a very prominent place. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts us to fast in secret, not for show, with the promise that "your Father who sees in secret will reward you" ([Matthew 6:18](#)). God rewards fasting. But how?

First, a vital clarification. The fasting God rewards is not a declaration of our strength of will, but an expression of our emptiness, longing to be filled by him. Christian fasting doesn't come from our own power, but from a heart that God himself works in us ([Philippians 2:12-13](#)) and strength that God himself supplies ([1 Peter 4:11](#)).

Realizing this is not about our strength or willpower, what are the rewards he gives, through his free and unconstrained grace, when we fast for his eyes, and not as a show for others?

1. Answers to Earnest Prayer

The first and most immediate answer is the reward of what our fast is for. What was the specific stated purpose as we rehearsed above? Fasting functions as a kind of assistant to prayer. It comes alongside some specific request we're making of God, through the access we have in Christ ([Romans 5:2](#); [Ephesians 2:18](#); [3:12](#)), and expresses an unusual earnestness. Fasting, as a handmaid of prayer, makes some special plea to God, with an added intensity from normal, everyday prayer.

Fasting is a kind of special measure in the life of faith. Normal life is not fasting. Normal life is steady-state prayer and enjoying the Giver through his gifts of food and drink. Fasting is a special mode, for unusual prayer and for showing the Giver we enjoy him more than his gifts.

2. More of God Himself

This leads, then, to the ultimate reward of Christian fasting, and the "best of all" purposes we highlighted above: *God himself*. More important than God's earthly guidance and protection and deliverance and provision is our eternal reception of and rejoicing in him.

God made us eaters and drinkers to teach us about himself. He made our world edible and drinkable so that we might better taste his goodness when our mouths are full, and rehearse that he is better than food and drink when our stomachs are empty. Fasting serves as a reminder that our God is himself the Great Feast: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" ([Isaiah 55:1](#)).

God himself, in Christ, is the one who satisfies more than the best of foods, and quenches our thirst more than the purest of water, the richest of milk, and the best of wine. In him, our souls "eat what is good" and we "delight [our]selves in rich food" ([Isaiah 55:2](#)). He is the one who says, "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" ([Revelation 21:6](#)). We who have tasted and seen his goodness ([Psalm 34:8](#)) now join his Spirit in saying, "Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price" ([Revelation 22:17](#)).

Turn Your Aches upon Jesus

When we fast, the aches in our stomachs and pains in our gut are reminders that Jesus is the true food, not our daily bread, and that Jesus is the true drink, not our typical beverages. Christians *will fast*, as Jesus promised, because as people of faith, we know that believing in him means coming to him to satisfy our soul's hunger and quench our soul's thirst ([John 6:35](#)) — and one of the best regular reminders of it can be abstaining temporarily from other food and drink.

The great (and often hidden) reward of fasting is God himself. "Open your mouth wide," he says, *as we empty our stomachs*, "and I will fill it" ([Psalm 81:10](#)). God rewards Christian fasting because it attunes us to the very purpose of God in the universe: to magnify himself in our desiring, enjoying, and being satisfied in him. And he rewards it not just with *what* we're asking for with our fast, but ultimately with *who* he is as our desire, enjoyment, and satisfaction.

Christian fasting is not mainly about *what* we go without, but *who* we want more of.

The Place of Fasting in the Christian Life

by Thomas A. Tarrants, III, D.Min.
Vice President for Ministry & Director,
Washington Area Fellows Program,
C.S. Lewis Institute

Why Fast Today?

As we saw earlier, Jesus clearly assumed that his followers would fast, though he gave no details about how long or how frequently. This means that it is up to the individual to discern the type, timing and length of their fast.

The reasons that we might fast today are similar to those of believers in past generations: to subdue the flesh and humble ourselves before God and draw near to Him (Ps. 69:10; 35:13); as part of a life of worship and devotion to God (Luke 2:37); to express sorrow and repentance for our sins and ask God's help in breaking their power in our life; for power to resist demonic temptation and attack (Matt. 4:1–11); for the Holy Spirit's vision, guidance, and empowerment in ministry (Acts 13:1–4); to seek deliverance for the oppressed (Isa. 58:6); for the revival of God's church (2 Chron. 7:14); for protection of the nation in times of great difficulty or danger (2 Chron. 20:1–4); for national repentance and mercy when God's judgment of sin is at hand (Jonah 3).

It is important to note that church leaders through the centuries up to the present (both Catholic and Protestant) have testified to the great value of fasting in subduing the flesh and helping one become more open and sensitive to the Holy Spirit's operations, guidance, and strengthening.

Dangers to Avoid in Fasting

Common spiritual dangers in fasting include developing spiritual pride, which makes us think we are better or more spiritual than those who don't fast; formalism, which turns fasting into a routine devoid of its true meaning and purpose; and hypocrisy, in which we try to impress others with our fasting – a perennial problem that Jesus especially warned about (Matt. 6:16–18).

Legalism is another common danger in fasting and involves regarding it as a means of earning a better standing before God (and thus better access to His blessings). This happens when we come to see fasting as something we do for God that obligates Him to do something for us. It is a quid pro quo mentality in which our fasting funds a heavenly debit card that we can draw upon in some transactional way.

John Wesley cautions:

Let us beware of fancying that we merit anything of God by our fasting. We cannot be too often warned of this; inasmuch as a desire to establish our own righteousness, to procure salvation of debt and not of grace is too deeply rooted in all our hearts. Fasting is only a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for His unmerited mercy; and wherein without any desert of ours, He hath promised freely to give us His blessing.⁴

John Calvin says much the same thing.

The Proper Approach to Fasting

Wesley gave some helpful guidance about the right way to fast:

First, let it be done unto the Lord, with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father who is in heaven; to express our sorrow and shame for our manifold transgressions of His holy law; to wait for an increase of purifying grace, drawing our affections to things above; to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers; to avert the wrath of God; and to obtain all the great and precious promises He has made to us in Jesus Christ.⁵

Types of Fasts in the Bible

In the Bible, the most common fast lasts for one day, from sunup to sundown. It involves refraining from all food but not from water. Most people in good health can do this fast with water, but those with problematic health conditions, are pregnant, or are taking any kind of medication should check with their physicians first.

A variation of this fast runs for twenty-four hours or more without food, but involves drinking plenty of water. Examples of three-day and seven-day fasts are found in the Bible. Determining the length of time to fast like this depends on circumstances and the Spirit's leading.

Another fast, which is more intense in nature, lasts for up to three days and involves forgoing both food and water, as with Paul (Acts 9:1–19). This type of fast appears to be reserved for especially difficult and challenging situations. It is wise to check with your doctor before undertaking such a fast, especially if you have issues with heart, blood pressure, kidneys, or diabetes.

Less intense but of longer duration is a partial fast—a reduction in the amount of food eaten each day and possibly a modification of what is consumed. This first appears in the life of Daniel, who observed a partial fast that lasted for twenty-one days. For unspecified reasons, perhaps for reasons of state, he could not abstain from all food and improvised by observing a partial fast, during which, “I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks” (Dan. 10:2–3).

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus observed forty-day fasts. In the case of Moses, he took no food or water during two successive fasts of forty days with no eating between them. This was clearly done by supernatural enablement, as human beings cannot live eighty days without food. Thirty to forty days is the maximum according to medical professionals. And normally people can live only three or four days without water, and in any case no more than a week. Elijah's fast seems to have been of supernatural enablement as well. Jesus ate no food but apparently did drink water in his forty-day fast. This type of fast is possible for people in good health but should be undertaken only if clearly directed by God and confirmed by a mature, godly pastor or elder, and a physician.

Practical Suggestions for Fasting

If you are a normal healthy person, you should have no significant physical problems in a one-day, sun-up-to-sun-down fast with water. However, if you have diabetes, blood pressure issues, heart trouble, or other significant physical problems (or suspect you may) or you are pregnant or take any kind of medication, ask your doctor whether you should fast. Also, all persons should check with their doctors about longer fasts (with water) or any fasts without water.

Ask God to guide you about when to fast and for how long, and make God the focus of your fasting, seeking Him through prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation. Although God recognizes your fast from the very beginning, it may take eighteen to twenty-four hours from your last meal before your bodily functions slow down to the point where you notice greater mental acuity and spiritual sensitivity. At this stage, you may find yourself more focused and bold in your praying. If so, be alert to the Holy Spirit's

promptings in how to pray and for any conviction of sin, personal encouragement, special guidance, and direction. Also, you may find blessing by taking some time to sit quietly before the Lord and just “gaze upon the beauty of the Lord” (Ps. 27:4) by pondering His grace and love, power and wisdom, indeed, any of His perfections.

If you have never fasted or haven’t fasted for a long time, consider doing some short fasts to send your body a signal, that is, to put it on notice. Your body is accustomed to being pampered and fed tasty cuisine on a regular basis; it may grumble if its delicacies are suddenly withdrawn without notice. In some cases it can whine and complain with minor, temporary physical symptoms like hunger sensations, headaches, constant thoughts of food, feeling cold, etc. (Those who regularly use caffeine or nicotine may have withdrawal symptoms, but they will pass.) While these complaints amount to nothing and are short-lived, they may be distracting. The message you want to send your body is, I am in charge, and you will do what I say. This is important, because the body is meant to be our servant not our master. We should eat to live, not live to eat. This points out one of the basic spiritual challenges for anyone who fasts: to exercise one’s reason and will to take authority over one’s body and its desires in order to walk by the Spirit and not the flesh.

A good way to ease into fasting is to do several one-day partial fasts. For example, you could limit your eating to one piece of toast for breakfast, lunch, and supper, or you might drink only a small glass of juice at mealtimes. Always drink plenty of water when fasting. If possible, use the time you save at mealtimes to seek God in prayer or to read or meditate on Scripture.

When you are ready to move on to a one-day fast with no food but plenty of water, a good way to start is by skipping supper. If your last meal was lunch, you would wake up the next day with your body already well into your fast. That gives you all day to seek God in prayer and the word.

Resume eating at suppertime. It will help your digestive system if you eat relatively smaller quantities of easily digested food for a couple of meals. It is important to exercise self-control and not gorge on food, which might be a temptation for some. Become comfortable with doing one-day fasts before attempting multiple-day fasts.

For fasts longer than one day, you need to pay more attention to what you eat a couple of days before and for some days afterward (depending on how long you fast). This is particularly important when breaking the fast, because your digestive system has gone on “pause” and has reduced or stopped the production of various enzymes needed to process food. If you overeat or consume the wrong foods, you will pay the price.

For a three-day fast in which you drink water but eat no food, a couple of days before you begin, eat a soft diet of fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, and other nutrients that will not clog your digestive system and are easy to expel; avoid any significant amounts of meat and cheese. Drink plenty of water during the fast. Break the fast gradually, starting with fruit or vegetable juice, then small amounts of easily digested foods, such as raw fruit (not citrus), applesauce, or yogurt. Avoid meat, greasy foods, and other foods that are hard to digest. And don’t overeat; discipline yourself to gradually resume normal eating.

In this article you have read enough to get started. However, if you want to do fasts with water longer than three days, or any fast with no food and no water, you would do well to read a good book or two on fasting and also consult a physician. If I could recommend only one book, it would be God’s Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis, which is a helpful guide to the biblical, spiritual, and practical dimensions of fasting. Also helpful is A Hunger for God by John Piper, which provides an interesting, informative, and inspirational account of fasting in the Bible and throughout history. The two complement each other very well.

If you long for a deeper relationship with God or if you face a crisis or situation of special need, adding fasting to your prayer is a way God has given us to seek Him more earnestly. If you make fasting a regular part of relationship with God, you will never regret it. For He has said, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

Fasting Guide

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in your richly.” - Colossians 3:16

- I. **Dwell on who God is.** Spend some time in scripture digging into who He really is and what His Word says about His character. A great place to do that is in the Psalms. Write down all that His Word says that He is.
 - a. Psalm 103
 - b. Psalm 145
 - c. Psalm 27

- II. **Pray about who you are in light of who He is.** What does your flesh tell you that you are? What are your fears, concerns, anxieties? Take some time to pour out your heart to Him. Ask Him to point out characteristics of Himself that speak directly to your fears and concerns.

- III. **Be still.** Spend some time listening to Him. Find a place that is away from others, without distraction...sit with His Word and let Him speak to you. Write down what you are hearing from Him.
