



Cassie
Achermann

DISCIPLINES OF DEVOTION

EDITED BY WINFREE BRISLEY

FASTING

“The Disciplines of Devotion series is a timely and valuable resource for women who long to grow in spiritual depth and maturity. With biblical insight and godly wisdom, each volume offers practical help for cultivating habits that lead us closer to Christ. I’m thankful for this series and eager to see how God will use it to strengthen and encourage the hearts of women.”

Melissa B. Kruger, author; Vice President of
Discipleship Programming, The Gospel Coalition

“These gospel-centered primers are saturated with scriptures that nourish the delight of knowing Christ. The accessible content, coupled with practical ideas and heart-oriented application questions, invites the reader to draw near to God through cultivating Spirit-empowered holy habits.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries,
Presbyterian Church in America; coauthor, *Transformed:
Life-Taker to Life-Giver* and *Life-Giving Leadership*

Fasting

Disciplines of Devotion

Edited by Winfree Brisley

Fasting, by Cassie Achermann

Prayer, by Courtney Reissig

Sabbath Rest, by Megan Hill

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Fasting

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*For my parents, Peter and Linda Watson,
who first taught me to hunger for the Lord.*

Contents

Series Preface *ix*

- 1 What Is Fasting? *1*
 - 2 What Are the Blessings of Fasting? *13*
 - 3 Fast with Humility *25*
 - 4 Fast with a Plan *35*
 - 5 Fast with God's People *43*
- Conclusion *51*

Recommended Resources *55*

Series Preface

ON A CHILLY JANUARY MORNING, two friends and I huddled around a coffee shop table to share life updates and prayer requests. One friend reflected on the previous year with frustration: “I feel like I didn’t accomplish anything.” The other friend and I, surprised by her assessment, rattled off a long list of worthwhile things she had done. But she persisted. It wasn’t that she truly believed she had accomplished nothing; it was that the things she had done weren’t the things she had hoped to do. Things she valued had been pushed aside by what seemed more urgent in the moment.

I could say the same, and I bet you could too. As women living in a do-it-all culture, we tend to

SERIES PREFACE

have a lot on our plates. We juggle work, husbands, children, aging parents, and friends. We manage households, serve in the church, and volunteer in the community. Year after year, many of our goals and good intentions get pushed to the back burner—especially when it comes to spiritual growth.

We want to grow in relationship with the Lord. We want to know the Bible better, fight sin, and establish a consistent prayer life. But amid all the things we have to do, we often miss the one thing we really need. In Psalm 27:4 David said,

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

As king, David surely had many things to do and many things he might have asked of God. But he knew that what he most needed was to dwell with

the Lord. Similarly, Jesus explained to Martha in Luke 10:41–42 that she was “anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” What was the one thing? Sitting at his feet, listening to his teaching.

As you consider your relationship with the Lord, are you more like David or Martha? Are you *devoted* or *distracted*? I suspect that many of us would admit that we identify with Martha’s distraction but also long for David’s devotion. So how can we grow in devotion to God in a world of endless distractions?

We see from both David and Martha that a life devoted to the Lord won’t happen by accident. David resolved to seek after God’s presence. Jesus suggested that Martha needed to sit down and listen. You see, discipline helps us grow in devotion.

In fact, throughout history Christians have used spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and Bible study to seek the Lord and grow in relationship with him. If the phrase “spiritual disciplines” sounds intimidating, don’t worry! It simply means practices

that promote spiritual growth.¹ And these practices can help you draw near to God whether you're a new believer or have been walking with the Lord for decades.

Perhaps the idea of cultivating a life of devotion to the Lord is new or confusing, and you don't know where to start. You have faith in Christ, but you're trying to figure out what it looks like to grow in relationship with him.

Or maybe you're going through the motions of spending time with God, but if you're honest, he feels distant. You want the Holy Spirit to warm your affections for the things of God and restore the joy of your salvation.

Or perhaps you have a vibrant relationship with the Lord, but you'd like to learn new ways to seek him. You've been wanting to try fasting or you'd like to learn about Sabbath rest.

Whatever your situation, the *Disciplines of Devotion* series was written for you. Each booklet explores

1 Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Nav-Press, 1991), 17.

SERIES PREFACE

one thing—one practice to cultivate, one spiritual discipline to grow in—to help you draw near to the one true God. In each booklet, you'll gain a biblical understanding of a particular discipline and why it's worth cultivating. And you'll explore three practical ways to get started.

If you'd like to grow in these disciplines alongside other believers, we've included reflection questions to facilitate group discussion. Consider using this series in one-on-one discipleship, with a group of teens, in a neighborhood Bible study, or with a church small group. Also, Christians have a variety of perspectives on these disciplines, so if you'd like to continue your personal study, you can find a list of recommended resources at the end of each booklet.

When you finish this volume, let me encourage you not to set it aside in a pile of good intentions. These booklets can be read in less than an hour, but the disciplines they recommend can help you seek the Lord for a lifetime—even as you go about all the things you have to do.

SERIES PREFACE

Preaching about the “one thing” David desired in Psalm 27:4, Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren observed, “Most of us seem, to our own consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days. . . . But if we are true to the one purpose of serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the frittering away of our lives in distractions.”²

The *Disciplines of Devotion* series isn't about productivity or efficiency or doing less. It's about pursuing a life of devotion to the Lord in an age of endless distraction. It's an invitation to “taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8) no matter how much is on your plate.

Winfree Brisley

SERIES EDITOR

2 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Psalms* (Eerdmans, 1932), 146.

What Is Fasting?

I USED TO WISH I could eat toast for every meal. Toast with peanut butter. Toast with Vegemite (an Australian classic). Occasionally, the sweet delight of toast with jam. I wanted to live on carbs.

But as the years have passed and I've left my twenties behind, my body has let me know I need vegetables. Lunchtime has increasingly featured soups in the winter and salads in the summer. And to my surprise, my appetite for healthier foods has grown (though I still love my morning toast). I sometimes even look forward to loading up my salad bowl.

Our spiritual appetites need a similar recalibration so that we find pleasure in Christ instead of in the world's offerings.

We look for satisfaction in the next swipe of the credit card, the next glowing report about our kids, the next career milestone, or the next hundred Instagram followers. Yet contentment eludes us time and time again. The solution isn't to continue pursuing the sugar rushes of what this world can offer but to seek what truly nourishes.

The practice of fasting can be part of this recalibration because it helps us draw near to God. Our famished souls learn that there's no one more satisfying than him. If you're worn out trying to capture elusive joy in this world, join me as we explore how fasting can give you the only hunger that leads to lasting satiation.

What Is Fasting?

In my early teens, I did World Vision's 40 Hour Famine a few times with my sisters, which meant going without food to raise money for people facing

poverty.¹ We'd wander around church clutching our sponsorship books, and kind folks who knew I was shy would take pity on me and offer to donate.

When the designated weekend came, we'd lay at home groaning for what felt like endless hours while our dad intentionally wafted his food aromas in our direction. As soon as the clock struck noon on Sunday, we'd rush to McDonald's and down triple-cheeseburger meals.

Until a couple of years ago, the 40 Hour Famine was my only fasting experience (apart from some blood tests). But these periods of white-knuckle deprivation and constant complaining are a far cry from biblical fasting. They had a different purpose—to raise awareness and money rather than to help me spiritually.

In contrast, the kind of fasting we consider in this booklet refers to going without food for a limited time to aid prayer. Let's consider each part of this definition.

Fasting is *going without food*. People fast from things other than food, such as social media or

1 For more information, see <https://40hourfamine.com.au/>.

television. Those fasts can be beneficial and may be your only option if you can't fast for medical reasons.² I hope this booklet is helpful for those cases, but our focus is only on abstaining from food (going without water for a fast of any length is dangerous).

Fasting is practiced *for a limited time*. The goal of fasting isn't to go as long as you can without food. It's not meant to be a continual state of life. Food is a good gift from God, and most of the time we're to enjoy it with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4; cf. 1 Cor. 10:31). After all, there is "a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1)—a time to fast and a time to feast.

Fasting *aids prayer*. We're not talking about fasting for medical reasons, as a weight-loss strategy, or even as a mere exercise in self-control. It's always a Godward practice done for the Lord and by his strength.

- ² If you have any medical conditions that may make fasting inadvisable, talk to your doctor first. Those with eating disorders will likely find fasting more harmful than helpful. Those with a history of eating disorders should likewise exercise caution and seek godly counsel. Remember, fasting is an aid, not a requirement. You're no less godly if wisdom dictates that you shouldn't participate.

Don't think of fasting as a burdensome task to add to your already overflowing to-do list—it is rather a means of helping you bring all your neediness and weakness to God's throne.

I began fasting out of a sense of deep need for God. A Bible study I had worked through left me yearning for God to bring revival in my heart as well as in my church.³ I started small, skipping lunch once a week and instead spending that half hour praying. Not long after, I added a second day in the week. These weren't aimless, wandering prayer times; I was asking the Lord urgently for help in two specific areas: first, for a breakthrough in an area of ongoing sin, and second, for spiritual revival in my church, where I'd been facing discouragement and difficulty for a while.

I've never regretted a time of fasting. It has pushed me toward heartfelt prayer more than almost anything else in my life. Any pain and discomfort has been worth it for renewed closeness to the Lord.

3 Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth and Tim Grissom, *Seeking Him: Experiencing the Joy of Personal Revival* (Moody Publishers, 2019).

I haven't always received the specific outcome I've wanted, but even when my situation hasn't changed, my heart has.

Fasting in the Bible

God's people have fasted in all kinds of ways throughout history. We dig into some passages in more detail later in this booklet. For now, let's briefly tour the Bible to see why God's people fasted.

Obeying God's Command

There's only one instance in the Bible where God commanded people to regularly fast. Under the old covenant law, Israel was to observe the Day of Atonement once a year. They gave offerings, abstained from work, and "afflicted" themselves (Lev. 23:26–32), meaning they fasted.⁴ This demonstrated how serious their sins were and how much they needed God's mercy. It was an outward sign of inward humility, and the whole nation was to do this together.

⁴ John Currid, notes on Leviticus, in *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008), 239.

Believers under the new covenant do not observe the Day of Atonement, given that Christ fulfilled what it foreshadowed in his death. But the principle behind it resonates with the example of others in Scripture who fasted, inviting us to continue the practice today.

Expressing Repentance and Grief

Fasting in the Old Testament was often a sign of mourning, particularly for sin. One notable example is in the book of Jonah. God instructed the reluctant prophet to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and announce its impending destruction. Jonah was reluctant, but he eventually obeyed. Surprisingly, the people of Nineveh didn't just mourn what was coming to them but mourned their sin. They put on sackcloth, wept, and fasted as a display of genuine repentance (Jonah 3:5–9). And God relented from destroying them (v. 10).

Throughout the Old Testament, people expressed grief over their sin or the sins of others through fasting and prayer.⁵

5 For example, see 1 Sam. 7:6; 1 Kings 21:20–29; Ezra 9:1–5; Neh. 1; Dan. 9:1–19.

Seeking God's Protection, Provision, or Guidance

Expressing repentance often involved petition—people asked God for mercy or deliverance from the consequences of sin. But there are also many passages where fasting served to intensify other requests.

In the book of Esther, the Jews faced eradication under the king's edict. Only Esther could persuade the king to change his mind, but she could be killed for coming before him unbidden. She called on all the Jews to join her in fasting for three days and three nights (Est. 4:15–16). Though it's never explicitly stated, this fasting would have been accompanied by prayer.⁶ By God's miraculous hand, the king was favorable toward Esther, and the Jews were spared.

God's people also fasted and prayed for deliverance in battle, protection while traveling, guidance for decisions, fulfillment of the Lord's promises, and more.⁷

6 Wallace P. Benn, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: Restoring the Church, Preaching the Word* (Crossway, 2021), 163.

7 For example, see Judg. 20:26; 2 Chron. 20:3–4; Ezra 8:21–23; Luke 2:36–38.

Jesus on Fasting

Fasting continued in the New Testament, even after Jesus's arrival. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness before he was tested by Satan.⁸ When the evil one tried to convince Jesus to turn a stone into bread, using his divine power to serve his own interests, Jesus quoted Scripture and gave us what may be the key attitude for fasting: "Man shall not live by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4). Going without food reminds us that there is something more important and satisfying than food.

Jesus also explicitly taught his followers about fasting. In the Sermon on the Mount, he instructed them not to fast to impress others (Matt. 6:16–18). He condemned those who boasted in their fasting before God as if it made them righteous (Luke 18:10–14).

⁸ Jesus's forty-day fast paralleled Moses's fasts (see Ex. 34:27–28; Deut. 9:18–19) and the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness for forty years (Deut. 8:2). This was a special period when Jesus proved himself as God's obedient Son. God preserved both Jesus and Moses, as his representatives, beyond what a human being can normally handle. So these examples aren't normative for us.

In Matthew 9:14–15, Jesus spoke about the right time to fast. He was questioned by John the Baptist's disciples about why his own disciples didn't join the customary fasts. His answer implied that the Jews had forgotten what fasting was meant for. Jesus, the bridegroom, was bodily present with his people. Fasting with Christ made as little sense as mourning at a wedding celebration. One day, he said, they would fast again, when he was taken away from them at his ascension. The church did this in the first century (Acts 13:1–3; 14:23). In other words, Jesus's disciples didn't need to fast because he was physically present with them. Fasting is helpful for us, however, because we're physically separated from our Lord and long for him to return.

Across the Old and New Testaments, God's people have fasted. And Christians have continued ever since. You might see your needs reflected in these biblical stories. Do you feel weighed down by your sin, grieved by evil in the church or world, or desperate for God's presence and guidance? Though fasting doesn't seem common in evangelical circles today,

many throughout history have followed the example of the early church and the rest of the biblical witness. Might you join them?

Reflection Questions

1. What experience do you have with fasting, if any? (It could be fasting from certain types of food, social media, etc.)
2. What sparked your interest in fasting or led you to read this booklet?
3. What did you learn from the biblical examples of fasting in this chapter? Which one most resonated with you?

