

*The* ROOTS & FRUITS *of*  
FASTING

MARY RUTH SWOPE

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## THE ROOTS AND FRUITS OF FASTING

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## FOREWORD

At last, millions of Americans are beginning to recognize that we have lost our grip on a powerful spiritual tool used by our biblical forefathers—the discipline of fasting, added to prayer.

Now that many Christians across our nation have begun to recapture the essence of prayer and fasting, their minds are expanding to appreciate its historical, theological, and medical value. The results we have been seeing are dramatic, and I believe they will also be long lasting.

This easy-to-read, practical book deals with fasting from the spiritual, psychological, and physical points of view. Swope reviews biblical accounts of fasting from both the Old and the New Testament and addresses the question of why this generation of Christians should practice this scriptural discipline.

We also need to anticipate the physical health benefits of fasting with an understanding of the guidelines for how to engage in a successful fast, whether it is short-term or long-term. These topics, along with others, are addressed in this book. Swope shares with her audience what kind of symptoms to expect while fasting, how to correctly break a fast, and some possible complications that you might face along the way.

In addition, suggestions for good nutrition, according to God's plan, are included and complemented with insights on how science and the Bible agree on dietary matters.

I like Dr. Swope's appeal in Part II of the book to "Fast for the Hungry" as a way to create more discretionary income to support Great Commission projects and outreach programs, such as we have here at CBN, just as do many other ministries.

If you are looking for a practical guide on fasting and prayer, you will enjoy studying this very helpful book—*The Roots and Fruits of Fasting*.

—*Michael D. Little*  
President and Chief Operating Officer,  
The Christian Broadcasting Network

## PREFACE

The idea for this book came in an inspired moment in the middle of the night. I decided on the title and the table of contents in just one hour. Within weeks, the entire project was ready for the printer.

This was possible because, over the years, I had compiled extensive information on the subject of fasting and filed it away in four manila folders. The availability of this research, taken from library reading notes, classroom lectures, speeches, religious magazines, and even two term papers by former students (one of them dating back to the summer of 1966), worked to my advantage.

The major disadvantage, however, is that I cannot properly credit the original authors for their scientific, theological, and medical contributions to this book. In the bibliography, I have referenced several books that were major sources of information for this work. I am especially grateful to Joel Furman, M.D., whom I have not met, for his book *Fasting and Eating for Health*. Don't miss an opportunity to read it. Without the input of these qualified sources, I would have been left with only my personal testimony from twenty-two-plus years of observing the practice of fasting. And that was not enough for the kind of book I wanted to write.

The major goal of this book is to show how fasting and fitness are synonymous terms, whether you are speaking physically, psychologically, or spiritually. Millions of Americans are sick in all three realms, and many are looking for a natural cure for their problems. Extensive scientific evidence shows that fasting, when observed correctly, is a viable treatment for both preventing and reversing a host of physical illnesses common to our society.

In addition, volumes of available books, both modern and historical, present convincing evidence of the value of prayer in changing physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual circumstances. When these two disciplines—fasting and prayer—are applied simultaneously, they provide a total program of calisthenics, discipline, and diet so desperately needed to bring our society back to good health.

Complete directions for how to fast, what to expect from a fast, how to break a fast, and other practical guidelines for fasting can be found in Part I.

Part II introduces readers to the part of my ministry, Nutrition with a Mission, Inc., called Fast for the Hungry. This project is designed solely to motivate people to do three things:

- ✦ deny themselves unneeded calories (or other unnecessary items or services),
- ✦ save the money those calories (and other things) would have cost, and
- ✦ give the money saved to support philanthropic and/or Great Commission projects and programs.

First tested in 1979, this project has been successful in helping Christians grow spiritually, give abundantly, and improve physically—all at the same time!

It is my dream that this book will make a healthy contribution to these goals.

—*Dr. Mary Ruth Swope*



**PART I:**

THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS AND FRUITS  
OF FASTING



## THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF FASTING

To make sure we are in agreement, it is important that we understand the meaning of “fasting.”

The definition of fasting has not changed throughout history. In the Greek and Hebrew languages, the words for fasting are *nes-teuo* and *tsumm*. The Greek word means “to abstain from food or drink”; the Hebrew word means “to cover your mouth.”

*Merriam-Webster’s 11<sup>th</sup> Collegiate Dictionary* defines *fast* as “to abstain from food” or “to eat sparingly or abstain from some foods.” Beverages are not mentioned here.

Modern authors and health professionals differ in their definitions of fasting. For the purpose of this book, I define fasting as simply the practice of deliberately and willfully denying yourself your usual intake of food and/or drink—mostly for spiritual purposes.

### TYPES OF FASTS

There are three different types of fasts: (1) a normal fast, (2) a total fast, and (3) a partial fast.

## 1. Normal Fast

This involves no solid or liquid food but lots of water.

The first account of this kind of fast is found in Genesis 24:33—the story of Abraham’s oldest and most trusted servant, who was determined not to eat until he found a wife for Isaac.

This type of fasting is not a new phenomenon.

## 2. Total Fast

A total fast means that no food or drink is consumed at all. This kind of fast is observed for special purposes and must be directed by the Lord.

Moses went on a total fast for forty days and forty nights when he was on the mountain (see Exodus 34:28); Paul, after his conversion, spent three days without food or water (see Acts 9:9); Esther and all Jews fasted for three days without food or water before she went before the king to plead the case of her people (see Esther 4:16–17).

This kind of fasting can be physically dangerous; therefore, it should be undertaken only if God speaks directly to you and prompts you to observe a total fast.

## 3. Partial Fast

During a partial fast, only certain foods and drinks are eliminated. An example of a partial fast is Lent, during which Catholics give up eating meat on Fridays.

A biblical example of a partial fast was when Daniel refused the king’s meat and drink, eating only vegetables and water. (See Daniel 1:12.) Later, he consumed “*no pleasant food, no meat or wine*” for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3). John the Baptist ate only locusts and wild honey for a period of time. (See Matthew 3:4.) Scripture does not tell us how long he fasted.

A vegetarian diet would not be an example of a partial fast, in my way of thinking. Vegetarians are not giving up meat for an occasional meal or over a period of time but rather have adopted a vegetarian lifestyle.

A partial fast simply means eating very light meals consisting of fruits or freshly squeezed vegetable or fruit juices. Heavy foods—such as proteins, fats, complex carbohydrates, and grains—are to be avoided. Daniel's fast allowed for grains, but he ate no meat, milk, eggs, or cheese.

In a partial fast, we give up some of our favorite foods, especially those that we crave and tend to overeat, for a period of time.

## FASTING IN BIBLE TIMES VERSUS TODAY

In ancient times, people fasted solely for spiritual reasons. In our day, by contrast, we need to fast for both spiritual and physical (including psychological) renewal and/or development.

Why is this? Let's look at two possible explanations:

1. In Bible times, people were eating according to God's dietary laws.

They ate plenty of vegetables and clean meats—mainly lamb and fish—and definitely “no blood.” (See Genesis 1:29; Deuteronomy 14; Leviticus 11.) There were no processed or man-made foods, such as margarine and synthetic eggs, to put extra stress on their digestive systems.

Soda pop and artificially sweetened beverages did not exist. Therefore, the people probably had healthier bodies and stronger bones. Since there were no salty snack foods or artificial ingredients in their foods, they probably did not suffer as much as people today from hardening of the arteries and high blood pressure.

High-fat foods, such as hamburgers, French fries, doughnuts, and ice cream, were nonexistent. Degenerative diseases caused by high consumption of fatty foods were rare in Bible times.

## 2. In Bible times, people had a healthier lifestyle.

Physical labor and hard work helped many people in Bible times stay healthy. Since their main form of transportation was walking, they enjoyed the many health benefits of daily exercise.

They also went to bed early because they didn't have electric lights, books, or televisions to entertain them. Their stress levels were undoubtedly lower than ours today due to their more relaxed lifestyle.

In addition, they breathed fresh air and drank pure water, both of which lower the risk of developing allergies and constipation problems.

Overall, the way of living in Bible times contributed to better habits and healthier bodies, and research confirms this fact. Therefore, the people of Bible times didn't need to fast for physical reasons, as we do today. But they did fast, usually for two days every week, in addition to their commemorative fast days.

My goal is to present fasting as a Christian responsibility and spiritual discipline that is physically, mentally, and spiritually beneficial to those who take advantage of it.

## OUR GREATEST SPIRITUAL WEAPON

The Bible indicates that both prayer and fasting constitute the strongest weapon given to God's believers. Just as faith needs prayer for its growth and development, prayer needs fasting for its growth and development. There is nothing more powerful to the people of God than the combination of prayer and fasting. It is our greatest spiritual weapon.

With that said, it is easy to understand why Satan has done, and will continue to do, everything in his power to keep God's people from recognizing and using this weapon of warfare. The enemy of our souls has blinded our eyes to the truth about fasting and prayer.

The problems facing America cannot be solved by lawyers, government officials, financiers, or any other group of people. Our nation's problems can be solved by God's people alone, through the practices of prayer and fasting.

Jesus told His disciples that they were "*the salt of the earth*" (Matthew 5:13). That implied that they were to impart "flavor" to their communities, beginning with their families. In other words, their very presence made the earth acceptable to God. Because of their presence, God continued pouring out His grace and mercy on the fallen world.

Not only does salt add flavor; it also acts as a preservative, helping to delay spoilage and corruption. In the same way, our presence as Christian believers on earth is supposed to slow down corruption in every aspect of human activity—moral, religious, social, and political.

Again, the combination of prayer and fasting constitutes the strongest weapon that has been given to God's people for use in spiritual warfare. There is nothing more powerful afforded to us. I hope that you will be inspired to join those who are taking up this weapon to defeat the enemy on a regular basis.

## OLD TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS OF FASTING

Fasting is commonly practiced by many religious groups—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Seneca Indians, to name a few. I will address fasting in this book, however, from the Christian point of

view, with the Holy Bible as my primary source of information. As in everything, the Bible is the final authority for or against any subject. Fasting is no exception.

The Jewish scribal law required a compulsory fast on the Day of Atonement. The people were to consider that as the Sabbath day, a day of rest to be spent “*in quiet humility*” (Leviticus 16:31 TLB). Even young Jewish children fasted on the Day of Atonement in order to prepare themselves to obey God as adults and fulfill the requirements of the Law.

There is evidence to show that many Jews also fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. They celebrated many times of fasting. In fact, the great revivals spoken of in Scripture were often preceded by fasting.

There are twenty-three mentions of fasting in the Old Testament. Let us take a moment to consider some of these examples.

### Personal Fasting for Guidance, Wisdom, and Healing

The first mention of a fast in the Old Testament appears in Genesis 24:33, when Abraham’s servant refused to eat until he found a wife for Isaac.

A later account of a fast appears in Exodus chapter 34, when Moses went to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God: “*And [Moses] was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water*” (Exodus 34:28 KJV).

Later, Moses observed another forty-day fast in an effort to save Aaron and the Israelites from destruction. (See Deuteronomy 9:18–19; 10:10.)

Hannah fasted for a child of her own and was granted a son, whom she named Samuel. (See 1 Samuel 1:11–22.)

When King David's little boy was ill, he fasted for seven days and told his servants, "*While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live?*" (2 Samuel 12:22 KJV). David apparently knew that when the situation was critical, and he needed a divine intervention, the best thing he could do was fast and pray. God, however, chose not to spare the child, probably because of the circumstances under which the baby had been conceived—David's adultery with Bathsheba. (See 2 Samuel 11:1–5.) Even so, I doubt that David regretted his efforts to seek divine intervention for the child's healing.

The prophet Daniel fasted and prayed about his vision concerning the end times and was granted wisdom and understanding. (See Daniel 9:3.)

### Corporate Fasting for Safety and Protection

In 2 Chronicles 20, we read about King Jehoshaphat, who was expecting to be attacked by the Moabites and the Ammonites. He feared for his life and his nation, and proclaimed a fast throughout all of Judah. The people came out of all the cities of Judah—even the wives and children. Why did they come? They came...

- ✦ to seek the Lord,
- ✦ to unite in declaring God to be their God,
- ✦ and to fast and pray.

Next, the Spirit of the Lord came upon one of the men, Jahaziel, who prophesied that the battle was not theirs but God's. Jahaziel proclaimed God's word to the people, saying,

*Listen, all you of Judah and you inhabitants of Jerusalem, and you, King Jehoshaphat! Thus says the LORD to you: "Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's."* (2 Chronicles 20:15)

Later on, we read that when the people began to sing and pray, God fought their battle for them. (See verses 18–22.)

Another illustration of corporate fasting and prayer is found in chapters 7 and 8 of Ezra. A great spiritual leader, Ezra asked permission of the king to take a copy of God's laws to Jerusalem and Judah. Since he also wanted to take with him some gold and silver as an offering to the God of Israel, Ezra gathered nearly 200 priests and other followers to accompany him. Then, he asked the men to fast and pray for three things:

- ♦ That they would have a safe trip
- ♦ That they would be protected from bandits
- ♦ That their children would be safe during their absence

Ezra said, *"I proclaimed a fast...that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us"* (Ezra 8:21 KJV). God honored the requests of Ezra and the people, saving them from the bandits, as well as protecting them on their way back to Jerusalem.

The book of Esther gives us another dramatic account of how fasting saved a nation of people from destruction. An evil government official named Haman devised a plot to have all of the Jews killed.

When Esther the queen, who was also Jewish, learned of the plot from her cousin Mordecai, she asked him to gather all the Jews and begin a fast for her, saying, *"Neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day"* (Esther 4:16). Esther and her maids also fasted.

Then she said, *"Though it is strictly forbidden, I will go in to see the king; and if I perish, I perish"* (Esther 4:16 TLB). When she approached the king, he showed favor on her and reversed Haman's decree to destroy the Jews.

The Jews still celebrate this event through the holiday of Purim. Would events such as this ever have happened without fasting and prayer?

### National Fasting for Economic Restoration

In Joel chapters 1–3, we read about the terrible condition of the land at that time in Israel’s history. All the crops had failed. The cattle suffered from lack of food and water. There was no meat offering or drink offering for the priests.

Joel told the people to sanctify a fast, saying,

*Who knows? Perhaps even yet he will decide to let you alone and give you a blessing instead of his terrible curse. Perhaps he will give you so much that you can offer your grain and wine to the Lord as before! Sound the trumpet in Zion! Call a fast and gather all the people together for a solemn meeting. Bring everyone—the elders, the children, and even the babies.*

(Joel 2:14–15 TLB)

Praying for God’s divine help and protection was the responsibility of spiritual leaders.

*The priests, the ministers of God, will stand between the people and the altar, weeping; and they will pray, “Spare your people, O our God; don’t let the heathen rule them, for they belong to you.”*

(Joel 2:17 TLB)

What was the outcome? The Lord did a mighty miracle. Everything was restored. He gave them back the crops that all the locusts had eaten. Once again, they had all the food they needed.

*Praise the Lord, who does these miracles for you. Never again will my people experience disaster such as this...I alone am the Lord your God.*

(Joel 2:26–27 TLB)

## Fasting and National Repentance

In the book of Jonah, chapter 3, God told the prophet to go to the city of Nineveh and tell the people that they were going to be destroyed if they did not repent. After much procrastination, Jonah finally obeyed. He entered the city and began telling the Ninevites that they would be overthrown in forty days, and the people immediately repented. The king declared a fast whereby everyone put on sackcloth (rough, coarse garments worn in times of mourning). They cried aloud to God, saying, *“Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will decide to let us live and will hold back his fierce anger from destroying us”* (Jonah 3:9 TLB). And they were right, for *“when God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, he abandoned his plan to destroy them and didn’t carry it through”* (verse 10 TLB).

This is another example of a total fast. Not even the animals could eat or drink anything.

The Old Testament contains twelve other examples of fasting and prayer, illustrating the importance of this practice among the Jewish people.

## Fasting That Pleases God

God-directed and man-directed fasting is not the same, as the prophet Isaiah’s classic presentation in chapter 58 makes clear. Men said to God, *“We have fasted before you....Why aren’t you impressed? Why don’t you see our sacrifices? Why don’t you hear our prayers? We have done much penance, and you don’t even notice it!”* (verse 3 TLB).

God quickly answered, *“Because you are living in evil pleasure even while you are fasting....Look, what good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me”* (Jonah 58:3–4 TLB).

The people had a form of religion and appeared to be godly, but they continued to quarrel and fight with one another. It was like those people who, when they fast, spend their time paying their bills and completing their own to-do lists instead of seeking the Lord. They were not seeking to know the Lord more intimately. They did not want to experience more of His power and purpose for their lives.

In Isaiah 58, God explains that fasting is much more than refraining from food; it involves the condition of the heart, as evidenced by the way we treat other people and how we spend our time. Throughout the chapter, He offers a host of guidelines and the blessings that follow, which I have paraphrased for you below:

- ✦ Stop oppressing those who work for you.
- ✦ Share your food with the hungry.
- ✦ Bring those who need food into your homes.
- ✦ Feed the helpless, poor, and destitute.
- ✦ Clothe those who are cold.
- ✦ Don't hide from your relatives who need help.

When your heart is right before God, you will see some of these results:

- ✦ He will shed His own glorious light upon you.
- ✦ He will heal you.
- ✦ Your godliness will lead you forward.
- ✦ Goodness will be a shield before you.
- ✦ The glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.
- ✦ When you call, the Lord will answer you quickly.

The followers of Christ need to stop oppressing the weak, making false accusations, and spreading vicious rumors. God says

that if you take away the yoke from your midst, if you stop pointing your finger and speaking wickedness and, instead, extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul...

*Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you shall be as bright as day. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy you with all good things, and keep you healthy too; and you will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. Your sons will rebuild the long-deserted ruins of your cities, and you will be known as "The People Who Rebuild Their Walls and Cities."*

(Isaiah 58:10–12 TLB)

What great blessings we receive from our generous God when we obey His commands!

## WHEN IT'S TOO LATE TO FAST

In Jeremiah 14, we see a different picture of fasting. God told the prophet Jeremiah not to pray for the people anymore—it was too late. When the people heard of their fate, they cried out to God, saying,

*O Lord, we have sinned against you grievously, yet help us for the sake of your own reputation!...Are you helpless to save us? O Lord, you are right here among us, and we carry your name; we are known as your people. O Lord, don't desert us now!*

(verses 7, 9 TLB)

And the Lord said to Jeremiah,

*Don't ask me any more to bless this people. Don't pray for them any more. When they fast, I will not pay any attention; when they present their offerings and sacrifices to me, I will*

*not accept them. What I will give them in return is war and famine and disease.* (Jeremiah 14:11–12 TLB)

Can a nation wander so far away from God that He will withhold His blessings and refuse to turn away His wrath, even if the people fast and pray?

In Jeremiah 36:9, the nation of Israel called another fast, but their circumstances did not change. Why? God told Jeremiah that they had not tried to follow Him.

This is a grim thought when we consider the condition of our society and the hypocrisy in the church in America today. Dr. D. James Kennedy may have had these passages in mind when he rebuked hypocritical Christians, saying, “Change your behavior or change your name.”

## NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS OF FASTING

Thousands of years have passed since the writing of the Old and New Testaments, but the practice of fasting is still just as important today as it was in those times. The New Testament includes twelve accounts of fasting.

When Jesus taught His disciples about the duties of giving alms, praying, and fasting (see Matthew 6:1–18), He used the words “*when you fast*,” not “*if you fast*.” (See Matthew 6:16.) This indicates that the giving of alms, praying, and fasting should be common practices among believers. We see that Jesus was talking about *all* of His disciples when He talked about prayer, saying, “*When you pray*” (see verses 5–7). The same is true in regard to fasting.

When Jesus Christ—the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the coming King who will rule and reign forevermore—says that

we should give alms, pray, and fast, I bend my knees and bow my head in willing obedience. Why? Because I have learned that He knows how to help me experience the most abundant life possible in the here and now—a life that will continue for the rest of eternity. I am “no fool” to obey what He has commanded!

## Jesus Fasted

If we are to pattern our lives after that of our Lord, then we need to observe how He fasted in order to learn it for ourselves.

*Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.*  
(Luke 4:1–2)

The devil tempted Him to break His fast, saying, “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (verse 3). But Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God’” (verse 4). He maintained His fast until God directed Him to break it.

## Jesus Expected His Disciples to Fast

When the Pharisees asked Jesus why His disciples were not fasting at a certain point in time, He gave them the following response:

*Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*  
(Mark 2:19–20 KJV)

The bridegroom—Jesus Christ—has not yet returned. This is a clear indication to me that our generation should be fasting! And

we learn through Christ's example that obedience is the highest form of love, for Jesus said, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15).

## Fasting and the Early Church

The New Testament provides several accounts of individuals who received unusual spiritual insight and personal victories from fasting.

The prophetess Anna "*served God with fastings and prayers night and day*" (Luke 2:37). She was the first person to recognize the baby Jesus as the Child of Promise, the Messiah. (See verse 38.)

Furthermore, the disciples prayed and fasted before they sent out other disciples who had been converted at Derbe. Thus, the door of faith was opened to the Gentiles. (See Acts 14:23–27.)

While Cornelius fasted, he received a visitation from an angel, telling him to summon Peter. It was during their meeting that Peter realized that Christ's love and salvation extended beyond the Jews to the Gentiles, too. (See Acts 10:30–34.)

Five teachers and prophets of the early church—Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul—fasted, and the Holy Spirit responded to them by commissioning Barnabas and Saul to begin their first missionary journey. (See Acts 13:1–3.)

During a sea voyage, the apostle Paul and 276 mariners fasted and prayed for fourteen days and were thus spared from losing their lives in the storm. (See Acts 27.) Paul was known for his frequent fasts. (See 2 Corinthians 11:27.) And who has achieved more for Christ and His kingdom than Paul did in his lifetime?