

## Leviticus 23: 26-32

And the LORD said to Moses, "On the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves (**FAST**) and present an offering by fire to the LORD. And you shall do no work on this same day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. For whoever is not afflicted (**DOES NOT FAST**) on this same day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on this same day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall do no work: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves (**FAST**); on the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath."

## My Love/Hate Affair with Fasting

By Neil Gallagher  
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**Yesterday I fasted. I hated it.** It was 20 degrees and gray. I was cold, hungry and pouting. I stopped at a long red light beside Dunkin' Donuts. I resented people seated on pink-cushioned stools, pressing hot, white-porcelain cups against their lips and sucking in streams of creamed coffee. I watched them rip chunks of chocolate-glazed doughnuts between their teeth and lick sugar flakes from their fingers. I resented that they were warm and full.

I fast each Monday. I have a love/hate affair with it. But I stick with it for six reasons:

**ONE**, I'm addicted to food. Once I start eating, I don't want to stop. A drug addict thinks only of the next fix, the alcoholic, of the next drink. When I eat, stacking my stomach with pizza, smashing a hamburger between my teeth, or bathing my tongue with strawberry shakes, I want to keep going. I'm tempted to think not of work or service, but food, food, food.

Supper time: "More potatoes?"

"Yuh, okay, Sweetie....and, uh, while you're there put a little more gravy on it." (Well, I *have* to eat seconds; it makes my wife feel good.)

9 P.M.: "Uh, Sweetie, while you're in the kitchen, bring me out some sherbet please." (Well, *everyone* snacks at night.)

Along with sherbet, I plunge my fist in a vanilla-wafer box. (Can't eat sherbet by itself, you know.)

This is followed by an apple, a sandwich, a glass of milk or something else "so that a sweet taste won't stay in the mouth."

Once I start shoveling forkfuls of food and crunching snacks, I will not stop. I keep on shoveling and crunching, regardless of time, weight, or expenses. And I always find excuses to deceive myself.

Fasting on Mondays kicks me in the slammer, protecting me from food. It's a slap in the face, stinging all week. I'm no longer driven by food. I'm in control of it, not vice versa.

**TWO**, I don't have a weight problem, and I don't intent to wait until I have one to say no to food. Fasting screams at me: Your body is a divine building, a home for God's Spirit.

Teaching me to be a good housekeeper, fasting shoves me on the track. Not just Mondays, but all week.

Fasting reminds me that it's dumb to wait until belly swims over belt before I discipline my body. It reminds me that if I wait to exercise until I am a flabby 40-year old, I risk straining a weak heart muscle.

**Three**, fasting rearranges my priorities.

We eat to stay alive and healthy. I know that now. I didn't before.

I used to arrange my schedule around: (1) breakfast, (2) coffee and doughnuts at 10, (3) lunch at 12, and (4) big supper at 6 (I used to spend more time eating at night than reading to the kids). Very subtly -- almost unconsciously -- I arranged my schedule to meet someone at lunchtime who'd probably suggest lunching while talking (it didn't matter who paid for it as long as I got the chance to eat). I arranged to visit people at home not always on the basis of their needs, but on the basis of who'd most likely feed me cake and coffee.

My schedule revolved around food.

Fasting on Mondays reminds me that I need to go to the "filling station" only once in a while; that food is for fuel, not mainly for fun.

**Four**, since fasting cuts not only excess food but *substance* food, I'm remembering each week that the world's hungry will be fed only when the rich are willing to give from substance, not just excess. And the world's definition of "rich" is: people who eat three meals a day, or can if they want to.

Since I began fasting, I've had more dollars to spend to hungry people. I estimate that by not eating on Mondays, I save at least three dollars, which I'm then able to send to a famine-fighting organization.

**Five**, fasting reminds me of hunger and provokes me to count my blessings. It's been a long time since I've felt forced hunger in a freezing tenement.

Living in a slum-tenement, my mother refused to yield to slum-mentality and so she inspired me to try college. I got a degree and got rich, earning \$75 a month while a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand. I ate three meals a day. That was ten years ago, and I've been eating three meals a day ever since (or can, if I want to). I forget what hunger is. On Mondays I remember.

**Six**, fasting cripples Satan, reducing the sphere of his attacks on me. God gave Satan temporary reign over the earth and its material parts, one of which is my body (Job 1; 1Peter 5:8). My body is bait, prey, and hunting ground. The more I deny the fleshly appetites of the body, the more I deny Satan access to my body. Constant eating -- meal after meal, day after day -- depletes energy, rapes discipline, smothers my intimacy with God, and opens avenues of attack for Satan. Relentless eating makes both flesh and spirit flabby. And twenty-one meals a week is (for me) relentless eating. Fasting on Mondays is a punch in Satan's face, driving him away from this body.

There are extremes of fasting, I've discovered. Fasting does not mean I deny food and its proper enjoyment. I now enjoy food more since I'm in control of it and not it, me. My wife bakes Mexican enchiladas dripping with yellow cheese and fire-red sauce, onion rolls -- soft, hot and tangy -- bursting with a cloud of steam when ripped open, and chocolate cheesecake, laced with white, crunchy coconut. I love them and want to enjoy them, but not be controlled by them.

And no one forces me to fast. Nor I others. Whenever priests, preachers, deacons or elders dictate a decision that on such and such a day everyone must fast, they're out of line. Fasting is voluntary, between each person and God.

Another extreme is dictating how to do it. I fast from Sunday night to Tuesday noon, usually with water and sometimes juice. I know Christians who fast for 10 days, taking only liquids. I know other Christians who can fast only from bedtime to noon the next day. Everyone's metabolism is different.

Another extreme is not fasting at all.