

Spiritual and Health Benefits of Fasting: Integrating Theology with Medical Care

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Abstract

The integration of theology and medical care remains an underexplored area within theological scholarship, with prevailing perceptions suggesting a disconnect between these fields. Scholars frequently categorize the relationship as either one of separation, opposition, or subordination, which highlights a significant dichotomy within theological education. This paper seeks to address this gap by employing an integrative approach to demonstrate the inherent connections between theology and medical care, particularly focusing on the theology of fasting as presented in scripture. Such exploration not only enriches theological discourse but also provides valuable insights for the practice of medical care within a spiritual framework. I advocate for a more extensive and multidisciplinary inquiry among Christian scholars to further investigate the intersections of theology and medical care across various domains.

INTRODUCTION

Fasting is abstinence from food and drink for a period of time. It is an age-long practice which is mostly for religious purpose.¹ It is an important spiritual exercise adopted by various religious groups, especially Christianity. Apart from religious purpose, individuals may engage in fasting for other reasons like health,

¹ Naughton 379-399.

for diseases preventions and treatments.² Many athletes engaged in fasting before competition in order to maintain their lean body mass and increase their endurance for performance at maximum capacity.³ Fasting had also been used by some people as a means of political protests.⁴

Health, according to the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) of April 1948 was defined as, “the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of diseases or infirmities”.⁵ This definition addressed the components (aspects) of health as physical, mental and social. By implication for someone to be healthy, it is expected of him to have no disease or impairment, to have developed the mental capacity to cope adequately with all the demands of daily living and exhibit adequate balance to achieve a stable state of equilibrium within himself and his relationship with his physical and social environment. Therefore, for any practice to be beneficial to health of individuals, it should improve the tendency to prevent disease or impairment, improve the mental ability to cope adequately with the demands posed by the stressful events of daily living as well as enhance the capacity for one to achieve a stable state of balance within oneself and ones relationship with his physical and social environment.

Fasting, though primarily, a religious (spiritual) exercise, has been found to have numerous benefits on various components of health. Though fasting as has significant spiritual health benefits, this article is restricted to discussing integrating Christian theology and medical care. It is intended here to explore some of these health benefits, discuss how these benefits can be achieved in individuals’ medical supervision during fasting, as well as highlight some harmful fasting practices that need to be avoided by Christians. These will all together aid at better understanding of fasting that will result

² Kernot et al 379-399.

³ Conde-Pipo et al 168,

⁴ Ibid. Kernot.

⁵ Ibid. Kernot.

in its correct practice to gained maximally from it and avoid the hazardous effects that may arise from its harmful practices.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF FASTING

Fasting in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, four distinct Hebrew words are commonly translated as "fasting." The most prevalent among them, *tsouwm*, occurs 26 times, with its cognate *tsuwm* appearing 21 times. These terms convey the concept of temporarily denying oneself food for specific periods, typically as declarations made by individuals to seek God's favor (Ezra 8:21), express repentance (Jonah 3:5), or signify mourning (2 Samuel 1:12).⁶ Another Hebrew word, *nazar*, translated as "fast" in Zechariah 7:3 (NIV), "abstain" (ESV), or "separating" (KJV), appears ten times throughout the Biblical text. This term implies a more permanent separation and consecration for the sake of holiness, often associated with Nazarite vows, which are highlighted in Numbers 6:2-6.⁷

The fourth term, *`anah*, meaning "to afflict or humble," is also occasionally used in the context of fasting. This usage is notably reflected in the observance of the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 23:27-32 and in instances of David's intercessory prayer and fasting found in Psalm 35:13.⁸ Overall, analysis of these four terms indicates that fasting in the Old Testament is characterized by a temporary denial of food and a humbling of oneself before God, serving purposes of expressing deep sorrow or seeking divine favor.⁹

⁶ Harlow, 352-355; McKenzie, 122.

⁷ Wright, 104-105.

⁸ Goldingay, 89.

⁹ Baker, 210.

Fasting in the New Testament

The New Testament employs three Greek terms derived from the same root to convey the concept of fasting: *nēsteuō* (occurring 21 times), *nēsteia* (8 times), and *nēstis* (2 times). While these words can be literally translated as “not eating,” their contextual usage implies that they refer to a ritual or religious observance. According to scholars like John Mark Hicks, fasting during the time of the New Testament often devolved into a mere ritual practiced demonstrating piety rather than a genuine effort to cultivate a closer relationship with God (Hicks 118). This is highlighted by the criticism Jesus directed towards those who sought to draw attention to their fasting practices in Matthew 6:16–18, emphasizing that true fasting should not bring glory to oneself but to God. Jesus, along with the early church, advocated for fasting as a purposeful act.

As noted by Richard Longenecker, for Jesus, fasting served as an intimate and personal communion with God, whether conducted individually or in community, aimed at fortifying oneself for spiritual challenges (Longenecker 846). The early church mirrored this approach, engaging in fasting not only for personal edification but also during significant church events, such as the commitment of church leaders, as described in Acts 14:23.¹⁰

BENEFIT OF FASTING IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Fasting constituted a vital element of both life and theology within the medieval Western church, serving various purposes, such as preparation for liturgical practices, functioning as an act of penance to alleviate the temporal consequences of sin, and fostering virtue. Liturgical fasts established a temporal rhythm for the ecclesiastical year, leading to the emergence of three prominent forty-day fasts by the seventh century: Lent, Pentecost Lent, and the Advent Fast. Additionally, the Ember

¹⁰ Horsley 141.

Days, which entailed three-day fasts corresponding with seasonal transitions, further shaped this rhythm.¹¹ By the fifteenth century, canon law mandated that the laity observe approximately seventy days of fasting annually, with local fasts for particular saints' days.¹²

Most fasting practices primarily involved abstaining from certain food types, particularly meat and animal products such as butter, cheese, and eggs. Fish, however, was permitted, as it fell outside the definition of “meat” for fasting purposes. This distinction was rooted in the biblical curse on the ground described in Genesis 3. By abstaining from terrestrial animals, participants acknowledged their sin and the repercussions of the original fall, with fish, residing in the untainted sea, remaining acceptable.¹³ The theological implications of fasting were intricately woven into various ecclesiastical frameworks. It not only regulated the temporal lives of laity, clergy, and monastics but also prepared individuals for engagement in sacramental activities, including baptism, the Eucharist, and ordination. Fasting served to symbolize communal membership while showcasing clerical authority.

Caroline Walker Bynum asserts that Thomas Aquinas enhanced the relationship between fasting and clerical authority by reinterpreting the Ember Days to align with ordination rather than seasonal change. She notes, “To Thomas, fasting is appointed on the quarter days because they are times of ordination, at which ‘both the ordainer and the candidates for ordination and even the whole people, for whose good they are ordained,’ abstain in order to be ready.”¹⁴ The clergy played a pivotal role in mediating church life and, consequently, individuals' relationships with God through fasting. Communal fasts overseen by clergy, along with those

¹¹ Arbesmann 43.

¹² Duffy 41.

¹³ Adamson 73; Bynum 41.

¹⁴ Bynum 45.

imposed by confessors, positioned clerics as authoritative figures in regulating the lives of the faithful through the governance of time and dietary practices. In terms of sanctification and ethics, fasting represented an act of individual devotion to God or the saints, as well as a means of fostering virtue by suppressing bodily desires.

Aquinas categorized fasting within the broader virtue of temperance, articulating its threefold aim: to diminish fleshly lust, elevate the mind toward higher realities, and make satisfaction for sins.¹⁵ The critiques of fasting by the Reformers reflected significant concerns with its medieval practices. They articulated several key criticisms: the Roman Catholic practice of fasting was susceptible to notable moral failings; the fasts mandated by the church infringed upon Christian liberty; and, at its core, the merit-based conception of fasting linked to the penitential system contradicted the gospel message. While Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin each contributed multifaceted challenges to the medieval fasting regimen, their emphases varied based on their specific theological frameworks and historical contexts.

BENEFITS OF FASTING ON HEALTH

Fasting, though mostly performed for spiritual purposes, has being found to also be beneficial to the physical, mental and social health of individuals who correctly engage in its practice.¹⁶ Therefore, it is pertinent that these benefits are examined and discussed.

Benefits of Fasting on Physical Health

Fasting is one of the measures employed for weight reduction in individuals with obesity. By ameliorating obesity, the risk of developing type two diabetes, stroke, hypertension, cardiovascular death, kidney disease, gall bladder stones, sudden

¹⁵ Aquinas 147

¹⁶ Kernot 379-399

deaths, osteoarthritis, and some cancers like those of the breast, large intestine (colonic cancer) and the womb (endometrial cancer), are markedly reduced.¹⁷ This weight reduction in obesity has also been found to increase insulin sensitivity, reduce the need for drug therapy and ensuring easier blood sugar control there by improving the well-being and quality of life of individuals living with diabetes mellitus. More so, Attainment of adequate weight for obese persons that had obesity also plays a major role in their blood pressure control as well reduction in the tendency for development of subsequent stroke among those with previous stroke. Weight reduction among obese people suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is beneficial at improving their exercise capacity and oxygenation there by improving their quality of life and survival.¹⁸

Weight loss is also helpful at preventing difficulty encountered in obese patients during anesthetic procedures and surgical interventions as well as post-operative complications like wound infections/break down, deep vein thrombosis, pulmonary embolism and heart attack.¹⁹

Regular practice of fasting has been found to have benefit of controlling the blood level of bad cholesterol (low density lipoprotein) and increased in the level of good cholesterol (high density lipoprotein) as well enhancing blood pressure control.²⁰ These effects also play a major role at preventing stroke, heart attacks, loss of limbs from non-traumatic amputations and sudden deaths.²¹

Achieving healthy weight for age and gender increase the fertility of both females and males of childbearing age with

¹⁷ Fruh S3-S14

¹⁸ McLoughlin et al., 1147

¹⁹ www.upmc.com/services/south-central-pa/surgery/optimization-clinic/obesity/losing-weight.

²⁰ Ahmed 596-789

²¹ .emro.who.int.

obesity.²² Also weight reduction in obese women improves egg maturation and release during menstrual cycle, improvement on the success of assisted conception, reduce the risk of miscarriages. After birth, obese women also have low breast milk production there by depriving the baby of the benefits derived from exclusive breast feeding. Adequate weight control achieved during fasting long before conception will assist at improving breast milk production.²³ Maintenance of healthy weight before pregnancy has also been associated with reduction in maternal deaths from prolonged labour and complications of caesarian sections.²⁴

Researchers have shown that fasting increases the process involved in the removal of harmful chemicals (toxins) from the body, enhances renewal of cells and reduces inflammatory processes.²⁵ These processes ultimately result in an increase in the lifespan of the individuals who engage in fasting.

Mental Health Benefits of Fasting

The health benefits of fasting go beyond just the physical component. A meta-analysis of eleven studies comprising one thousand, four hundred and thirty-six participants showed marked reduction in the risk score for stress, anxiety and depression during fasting when compared to the scores before the commencement of the fasting.²⁶ It also showed that symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression are lower during fasting.²⁷

According to Dr. Ozan Toy, a Psychiatrist, at Mental Health Clinic, Clifton, New Jersey, United States of America, “fasting definitely has some specific mental health benefits and may be

²² txfertility.com/male-infertility/obesity-and-male-infertility/.

²³ Ijiegbe 19-27.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Aly v-vi

²⁶ Berthelot et al 3947

²⁷ Ibid.

able to improve some of the symptoms of mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, mood and cognition in some individuals.”²⁸

Fasting increases the levels of hormones and other chemicals that are associated with memory, learning and cognition. These have been found to result in reduction in neuronal damage which ultimately result in improved memory and reduction in the development and progression of neurodegenerative disorders like Alzheimer’s disease.²⁹

Social Health Benefits of Fasting

Religious fasting is not just abstinence from food. It is a period of spiritual devotion to God. It also involves avoidance of falsehood both in speech and character. Fasting, particularly, when practiced at the same time by people in a community, prevent unwholesome behaviors like arguing, quarrelling, fightings and lustful thoughts within the homes and the community. Therefore, fasting promotes self-control and promotes good behaviors which enhances good interpersonal relationships among individuals within the Church and society. During fasting, impulsive and antisocial behaviors are avoided and people tend to be compassionate, generous and merciful toward the needy and destitutes (Isaiah 58:6-7). Fasting, therefore, promotes and encourages the development and sustenance of moral and social values by creating the environment of love, tolerance, forgiveness and unity in the Church and society.³⁰

In addition to the social health benefit of fasting gained through the spiritual exercise of abstinence from food and sharing with

²⁸ www.google.com/search?q=the+5+psychological+benefits+of+fasting&aq=the+5+psychological+benefits+of+fasting&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAMQIRIgATIHCQQIRifBTIHCAUQIRifBdIBCTQxODk5ajBqOagCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

²⁹ Ahmad, K. Goel, et al 178

³⁰ Isaiah 58:6-7.

the needy, this benefit will much more be appreciated if fasting is viewed from the perspective of Isaiah 58: 6-7 which present fasting beyond just abstinence from food but in addition, it is also viewed as the period during which the hopeless receive hope, the captives are assisted to be set free, the poor and needy are receive help, the hungry one are fed, offences among individuals are forgiven, thus, creating an environment with good interpersonal relationship and social cohesion.

INDIVIDUALS REQUIRING MEDICAL GUIDANCE/SUPERVISION BEFORE/DURING FASTING

Fasting, though very beneficial to health, have been shown to be hazardous to some groups of people. These individuals may become very ill, experience deterioration of their pre-existing ill health, still others have become incapacitated or dead for engaging in fasting without prior medical examination and advice.

Generally, it is not advisable for pregnant women, breast feeding mothers, individuals suffering from diabetes mellitus, sickle cell disease, heart disease, gouty arthritis, kidney stone, peptic ulcer disease, chronic liver disease, kidney disease, cancers and other forms of chronic illness to engage in fasting without medical guidance/supervision because it may be deleterious to their well-being. These groups of people will require medical evaluation, guidance and supervision by specialized health care personnel who will assess their health status and ascertain their suitability or unsuitability for fasting as well as offer guidance and supervise the conduct of fasting in order to prevent catastrophic occurrences.

A large study conducted by Nathalie Auger of University of Montreal Hospital Research Centre in Canada, and colleagues, evaluated the association between fasting during pregnancy and the risk of preterm birth among Arab women during the Ramadan fasting conducted from 1981 to 1997 showed that fasting during the second trimester of pregnancy particularly

between 22 and 27 weeks of gestation is associated with higher risk of delivery before term.³¹ This high risk of preterm deliveries in the second trimester has been attributed to the failure to meet up with the increased maternal energy demand at this stage of pregnancy.³²

Among the breast-feeding mothers who engaged in fasting, particularly long fasting on hot weather, there was high risk of profound body weakness and fatigue due to dehydration.³³ This may result in emergency medical care and decrease the potential for effective breast feeding.³⁴ This may stress the limited available health resources and also deprive the child from having maximal benefit of the health care recommended exclusive breast feeding, making them susceptible to preventable childhood diseases. Thus, impeding their growth and development.

It has been observed that diabetic patients who engage in fasting without medical guidance/supervision have higher tendency of developing uncontrolled blood sugar, which may be either high or low blood level.³⁵ Research has also shown that diabetic patients who obtain medical advice before commencement of fasting have better blood sugar control.³⁶ It is therefore advocated that a robust awareness strategy should be put in place to educate diabetic patients on pre fasting medical assessment, blood sugar monitoring, medication adjustment, diet and other lifestyle measures before commencement of fasting. This education should also be given to their relations/care giver.

³¹ Tith *Fasting During Ramadan 1826-1832*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Nakho, Saeed et al 1371-1373.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Noon 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Dehydration among sickle cell disease patients increases their chances of developing vaso-occlusive crises (VOC) such as bone pain crisis, acute chest syndrome, priapism and acute mesenteric crisis as well as complications like stroke and kidney failure. Therefore, those with sickle cell disease who require to fast should seek for physicians' guidance and supervision along with their relations/ home caregivers. They should be given adequate education on the dangers that may arise, their early features and the immediate remedies.

Dehydration which occurs during fasting has been observed to hasten the progression of heart failure.³⁷ Dehydration in these patients will result in sluggish blood flow to major organs that may ultimately result to increase in the tendency for these individuals to develop stroke, heart attack and sudden abnormal heart beats leading to sudden cardiac death.

HARMFUL PRACTICES DURING FASTING

There are some practices engaged upon during fasting or some forms of fasting that are not advisable because of their detrimental effects on health. These practices include having chronic medical condition but engaging in fasting without medical guidance/supervision and fasting against medical advice, continuation of fasting despite deterioration of pre-existing chronic ill-health. Other fasting practices that are deleterious to health include water fasting for more than three days without medical supervision³⁸ and breaking fast with consumption of high-calorie or high-fat food within a very short time. Medical experts warned that water fasting of more than 48-72 hours without medical supervision can result in fatigue, dizziness, confusions, etc.³⁹ Rapid introduction of large quantity of food after prolonged fast, will lead to the occurrence of a medical condition called re-feeding syndrome which sets off

³⁷ Wittczak, M. Slot, et al 2684.

³⁸ www.healthline.com.

³⁹ Ibid.

a series of body system reactions that manifest devastating symptoms which are sometimes fatal.⁴⁰ The early symptoms may be nausea, constipation, abdominal bloating, fatigue, then subsequently progressed to muscle cramps, leg swellings, difficulty in breathing, fast/irregular heartbeats, tremors, fainting attacks, convulsions and confusion

CONCLUSION

Fasting, though a religious/spiritual excise, has its benefits not only limited to spiritual well-being, but also beneficial to the physical, mental and social aspects of human health. These benefits, however, may be elusive to those who engage on it wrongly. Therefore, it is very essential for individuals to seek for and acquire knowledge on correct fasting practices. These will create awareness that will promote the acceptance and practice of healthy fasting habits with their consequent holistic health benefits.

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⁴⁰ Whelan 2012-2173.

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