

**Fasting in the Wesleyan Way**  
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**What Is fasting?**

Fasting is a spiritual practice observed in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, as well as many other world religions. The person choosing to fast is taking time away from the needs of the body in order to give intentional time and attention to God.

Fasting can mean a number of things:

1. It can mean abstaining from food and drink, abstaining from food only, or abstaining from certain foods for a limited period of time.
2. It can also mean simplifying the time needed to prepare and consume food in order to free time for communion and communication with God. John and Charles Wesley would have a simple meal of milk and bread, freeing the time normally required to prepare the meal and clean up afterward for devotion and prayer.
3. Fasting normally means abstaining from food as a spiritual discipline. However, fasting can also mean abstaining from other activities that require time, instead investing this same time and attention in the divine-human relationship available to us in Jesus Christ. Some Christian friends abstain from television, the internet, or other forms of electronic media for a day or a part of the day in order to give more time to God and to their families.

Most Christians accompany fasting with prayer. Many Christians view fasting as a way to intensify prayer and increase its effectiveness. Some believe that, by denying our physical hunger for a time, our spiritual sensitivity is heightened or enhanced. Fasting adds power to prayer and it helps us hear the voice of God more clearly.

**What Is the Wesleyan Way to Fast?**

During their days at university, John and Charles Wesley were convinced that the earliest Christians fasted and prayed on Wednesdays and Fridays, so they began to observe this same practice. As time passed and they began their mission to North America, they fasted mostly on Fridays, which was the Anglican norm. (See John Wesley's journal for August 1739.)

The Wesley brothers usually began a Friday fast at sundown on Thursday. This was in continuity with Jewish and early Christian tradition, which both marked the beginning of the day at sundown, not midnight. They typically ended their fast at 3:00 p.m. on Friday.

In every expression of the means of grace, John and Charles Wesley included fasting or abstinence as one of the ordinary means set forth in the Bible. Jesus gave his disciples clear instructions about how to fast (see Matt. 6:16-18) and the early Methodists were convinced of the importance of this practice in their time. They believed it to be an excellent "means of confirming and increasing seriousness of spirit, earnestness, sensibility and tenderness of conscience; deadness to the world, and consequently the love of God and every holy and heavenly affection." [(Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Oxford, UK: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 120-121.)]

Today in the ordination service, the bishop asks every United Methodist pastor:

“Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, by both precept and example?” And the ordinands respond: *I will so recommend.*

It is fitting that the Council of Bishops are calling the United Methodist people around the world to a season of fasting and prayer as we prepare for the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019.

### **Guidelines for Observing the Wesley Fast**

- 1. Learn from an experienced teacher.** If you have little or no experience with fasting in the Wesleyan way, seek the guidance of a Spiritual Director, pastor, or Christian friend who has this experience.
- 2. Prepare physically for the fast.** If you are taking any form of medication on a daily basis, consult with your physician to choose a means of fasting that is not in conflict with your daily health practices.
- 3. Prepare spiritually for the fast.** Ask the Holy Spirit to help guide you and listen to the response. Do not get so focused on the act of fasting that you forget the purpose of fasting—it is to take time from earthly things to make time for spiritual things. You are going to meet God.
- 4. Prepare nutritionally for the fast.** Decide whether you're going to do a complete fast (water only), a no-solid-food fast (allows milk, juice, coffee and tea), a no-meat fast, or some other fast. There are no fixed rules. Simply prepare yourself to meet God. Keep it simple and keep the fast you set out to do. Some forms of fasting are more difficult than others. In time, the Spirit will lead you to try different types of fast.
- 5. Determine the length of your fast.** The Wesleyan fast was normally on Friday; it was observed from sundown Thursday till 3:00 Friday afternoon. Some Christians fast from sundown Thursday till sundown on Friday. There is nothing special about Friday. It's simply a historical day for fasting in many Christian traditions because Jesus was crucified on a Friday. If another day of the week is better for you, fast on that day.
- 6. Stay hydrated.** Drink plenty of water while fasting, no matter what kind of fast you choose.
- 7. Be mindful of your health.** Fasting for multiple days is more complex than a twenty-four-hour fast. Make certain your doctor is aware of your intention for a longer fast and that you have an agreed plan that is not harmful to your health.
- 8. Let love be your aim and your guide.** There will be times when you will want or need to change your fast day to another day of the week. For example, if you have an opportunity to share a meal with someone on your fast day, change it to a different day that week. Love is not arrogant or boastful or rude. (See 1 Cor. 13:4.)
- 9. Make God the sole focus of your fast.** Do not use fasting as a means to gain the attention or admiration of others. (See Matt. 6:16-18.)
- 10. Expect something supernatural and spiritual to happen.** Jesus fasted for forty days before he began his earthly ministry. He fasted and prayed all night before he called the twelve disciples to follow him more closely. There were some miracles of spiritual deliverance that only came about by prayer and fasting. As you follow Jesus' teaching and example in faith and obedience, expect something real to happen.

## **Additional Resources for Fasting and the Wesley Fast**

1. See *The United Methodist Book of Worship* service for ordination and the instructions for the observance of Lent.
2. Read John Wesley's sermon on Matthew 6:16-18, the seventh discourse in the series "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount" (1747). It contains an extended discussion of the spiritual benefits of fasting.
3. Consult Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, Scarecrow Press, 1992.
4. Participate in the World Methodist Evangelism Friday Fast. ([Click here to receive the email reminder](#)).
5. See also the [Methodist Prayer](#) website.