

An Invitation to Spiritual Freedom

Fasting Brings Renewed Power

By Lynne Baab



A friend of mine was pregnant with her fourth child when something went wrong. After a long diagnostic process, the doctor told her she had a rare autoimmune condition that would almost certainly result in the loss of the baby. My friend called a woman from her church who was known as a prayer warrior.

The woman came and prayed for my friend, who experienced complete healing. That baby is now an active, healthy ten-year-old. One detail is often omitted from the story: the woman of prayer fasted for a day before praying for my friend.

Another friend of mine is the minister of a church. The church board wanted to have a couple of congregational forums to discuss some possible new directions. The first one was held on a weeknight, and it went pretty well, with some good discussion. The second one was held after church on Sunday.

People with medical conditions were encouraged to bring a lunch, and everyone else was invited to fast.

My friend noted that the tone of the second meeting was noticeably different from the first, with more insight, more love, and more willingness to seek God's leading in prayer. My friend believes fasting made the difference.

Rediscovering Fasting

Why does fasting have such power? It seems counterintuitive, illogical, and perhaps even a bit silly. For Christians raised in the 20th century in the United States, Canada, or other Western countries, fasting was seldom a part of our faith training. Fasting, so common in Jesus' time and in the early Church, somehow fell into disfavor.

However, Christians in other parts of the world—Asia, Africa, and Latin America—never lost sight of it. My husband visited a church in Kenya a few years ago, and the printed Sunday bulletin listed the monthly fast day for the congregation along with prayer requests for that day. When I was writing my book on fasting, I corresponded with a pastor's wife in South America who told me about her congregation's weekly fast day when they pray for needs inside and outside the congregation. They also have a week-long fast at the beginning of every year when they pray for guidance as a congregation.

Christians today in Western countries are rediscovering fasting. Some of the rediscovery has come from contact with Christians in other parts of the world who never abandoned this important practice. Some of the rediscovery has been nurtured by different voices in recent years. Mother Teresa, for example, emphasized fasting as a way to save money to give to the poor and as a way to experience a feeling of lack in solidarity with the poor. Richard Foster, in *Celebration of Discipline*, emphasizes fasting as a way to make space for

prayer.

The secular world has discovered the freedom of fasting from technology. I've read numerous articles about teenagers and adults who have engaged in fasts from smart phones, iPods and tablets in order to regain a sense of freedom and perspective. All of these influences have brought fasting back into focus for Christians today.

What Is Christian Fasting?

Here's the definition I like: Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community, or nation. Let me explain some of the components of this definition.

Voluntary denial of something. Fasting in the Bible relates mostly to food, and the same is true for fasting in most of Christian history. Today, Christians still fast from all food or from certain kinds of food like sugar or meat. In addition, Christians are finding great benefit in fasting from other components of daily life, such as coffee, shopping, news media, television, movies, and various forms of technology. Prayerful discernment about what to fast from is one of the first steps of fasting.

Whenever a small group or congregation wants to encourage fasting among its members, options for fasting that do not involve food need to be presented. Anyone with a past or present eating disorder should not be encouraged to fast from food in any form. Children and the frail elderly should not fast from all food. With so many other options for everyday things to fast from, anyone can fast.

For a specific time. Most fasts last for a day, a weekend, a week, or perhaps six weeks. Fasting is different from an

ongoing lifestyle habit. For instance, people committed to a vegetarian diet are not fasting from meat, because they have no intention of going back to eating meat. The benefit of a fast comes from the surprise component, the sense of being slightly off balance.

For a spiritual purpose. A Christian fast is primarily for the purpose of drawing near to God. At its best, the slightly off-balance feeling that comes from giving up a common component of everyday life provides motivation for prayer and reflection.

A fast without prayer and reflection will seldom result in the kind of freedom God desires to give us when we fast. Sometimes, as we eliminate something for a time, we see more clearly how that particular thing has affected our lives, which can help us honor and serve God more fully.

By an individual, family, community, or nation. Individual fasts can be very rich, a time of drawing close to God in our hearts. Fasting with others has major benefits: encouragement, prayer together, and someone to talk with about what God might be saying during the fast. Therefore, fasting in a small group or congregation can work well. In Africa, it is not uncommon for national leaders to call for a day of fasting and prayer for the whole country.

Fasting and Freedom in the Bible

In the Old Testament, fasting is closely connected with mourning, repentance, and intercessory prayer. One of the most fascinating Old Testament passages about fasting is in Isaiah 58. The people ask God why He doesn't hear their prayers when they fast, and God replies that they are serving their own interests (Isa. 58:3-4). God then goes on to describe the right attitude for fasting (vss. 6-7):

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

Fasting, in this view, is about freedom and well being for others, not just ourselves.

In New Testament times, the Jewish people routinely fasted two days each week. Jesus says, “When you fast” (Matt. 6:16), which makes sense in the light of the common weekly practice of fasting. Jesus goes on in the next two verses to say that we should not look dismal when we fast, seeking the approval of others. Instead, we should act normal “so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father . . .” (Matt. 6:18).

This verse has often been interpreted by Christians in the West to mean that all fasting should be in secret. In contrast, Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have interpreted this verse to mean that the motive for fasting is what matters. They recognize that fasting with others can be much easier than fasting alone. This gives them the freedom to engage in fasts with others. It is a blessing to many Christians when they understand Matthew 6:18 can be interpreted as focusing on motives for fasting, not on fasting by oneself.

In the first centuries after Christ, Christians emphasized Isaiah 58 and often fasted to save money or food to give to others. Sometime around 128 AD, Aristide, a journalist, explained to Emperor Hadrian the way Christians lived: “When someone is poor among them who has need of help, they fast for two or three days, and they have the custom of sending him the food which they had prepared for themselves.”

World Vision's 30-Hour Famine builds on this ancient tradition, providing a structure for fasting and learning about the needs of the hungry in the world. Many youth groups and young adult groups have participated in this program by spending 30 hours together in a controlled setting, raising money and praying for the poor as they fast. Participants have told me they experienced a deep solidarity with the hungry that they never expected.

The Bible also has several stories that demonstrate how a person can have bad motives for fasting. Jezebel proclaimed a public fast in order to try to get a prime piece of land that Naboth didn't want to sell her. She went on to murder Naboth in order to get the land (1 Kings 21:9–10). Jesus tells a story about a tax collector who fasted in order to look impressive to others and to God (Luke 18:9–14).

These stories stress that our hearts matter when we fast. We must center our fast on drawing near to God, and not on proving something to ourselves, to others, or to God. The freedom that comes through fasting is related to our heart attitude.

The major fasting themes from the Bible—repentance, mourning, intercession, caring for the poor, and heart motives—are still relevant today.

Want to Try Fasting?

God is the initiator of Christian fasts, so begin by asking God if a fast is the right thing for you at this time. If He is calling you to fast, be sure you ask for clarity on why you are fasting. Ask Him about the length of your fast. Are you to fast from all food or some specific foods? Coffee drinks? Shopping or TV sports? Media or email or surfing the web? You may want to ask others to pray for you for guidance about your fast.

Think about what you want to pray about during the fast, and what different patterns of prayer you will engage in. Make plans for Bible study and prayer during some or all of the time that's been freed up by not eating or by staying off the Internet.

As you plan, remember that the primary purpose of Christian fasting is not to change habits, confront addictions, or even to lose weight. A Christian fast comes from the desire to draw near to God—pure and simple. Of course, while fasting, we may be called to pray about the place in our life of the thing we are fasting from—and God may change our desires about that thing or give us insight into ways we can live a life more free and more centered in a relationship with Jesus.

Lisa, a teacher in her 30s, knows she should never fast from food because she had an eating disorder when she was younger. Instead, she fasts from lattes and shopping for clothes. She reflects, “Denying myself something that I use for comfort is a great reminder of my desire to keep my relationship with God as my first and foremost priority. Fasting challenges me to keep a perspective of who I’m living for at all times of the day.”

In the midst of the plethora of advertisements that push us toward consumerism and consumption, Jesus is calling His followers to find ways to step aside from the values of our culture and draw near to Him. Fasting offers a way to take that step. It clears our minds, opens our hearts, and enables us to see Jesus more vividly. God’s voice and call are more understandable and unhindered. We pray in new ways and with renewed power.

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