

Why Do People Fast and Pray? by Marilyn Hickey

"Fasting and prayer? Didn't those go out of style decades ago?" The woman who said this to me was a godly woman, a woman who had been in the church all her life, and a woman intent on obeying the Lord. She knew her Bible. She was very serious in her questions.

Yet for some reason, she had concluded -- at least subconsciously -- that fasting and prayer were no longer intended for believers in today's world.

The truth is, fasting and prayer are for today! In fact, now more than ever!

The combination of fasting and praying is not a fad or a novelty approach to spiritual discipline. Fasting and praying are not part of a human-engineered method or plan. They are not the means to manipulate a situation or to create a circumstance. Fasting and praying are Bible-based disciplines that are appropriate for all believers of all ages throughout all centuries in all parts of the world.

Through the years, I have learned that many people in the church have never been taught about fasting and prayer, and many have therefore never fasted and prayed. As a result, they don't know why fasting and praying are important, what the Bible teaches about fasting, or how to fast. To many, fasting sounds like drudgery -- or a form of religious works. To others, fasting sounds extremely difficult. People tend to stand in awe at reports of those who have fasted for several weeks. When I hear about such fasts, I no doubt think what they think: *If I fasted that long, I'd die! I couldn't possibly do that!*

Let me assure you at the outset of this book that I am not advocating prolonged periods of fasting for every believer. A fast can be as short as one meal. Neither do I advocate fasting and praying for the mere sake of saying with self-righteousness, "I have fasted and prayed about this." I do not advocate fasting so that the hungry in a foreign nation might have the food you would have eaten that day -- which is highly unlikely. I do not advocate fasting apart from prayer.

KEY REASONS TO FAST AND PRAY

I do, however, encourage every believer to fast and pray for two very important reasons:

1. *The Scriptures Teach Us to Fast and Pray*

The Bible has a great deal to say about both fasting and praying, including commands to fast and pray. The Bible also gives us examples of people who fasted and prayed, using different types of fasts for different reasons, all of which are very positive results. Jesus fasted and prayed. Jesus' disciples fasted and prayed after the Resurrection. Many of the Old Testament heroes and heroines of the faith fasted and prayed. The followers of John the Baptist fasted and prayed. Many people in the early church fasted and prayed. What the Scriptures have taught us directly and by the examples of the saints is surely something we are to do.

2. *Fasting and Prayer Put You into the Best Possible Position for a Breakthrough*

That breakthrough might be in the realm of the spirit. It may be in the realm of your emotions or personal habits. It may be in the realm of a very practical area of life, such as a relationship or finances. What I have seen repeatedly through the years-not only in the Scriptures but in countless personal stories that others have told me -- is that periods of fasting and prayer produce great spiritual results, many of which fall into the realm of a breakthrough. What wasn't a reality...suddenly was. What hadn't worked...suddenly did. The unwanted situation or object that was there...suddenly wasn't there. The relationship that was unloving ...suddenly was loving. The job that hadn't materialized...suddenly did.

The very simple and direct conclusions I draw are these: First, if the Bible teaches us to do something, I want to do it. I want to obey the Lord in every way that He commands me to obey Him. And second, if fasting and praying are means to a breakthrough that God has for me, I want to undertake those disciplines so I might experience that breakthrough!

Every person I know needs a breakthrough in some area of his or her life. I am no exception. I need breakthroughs all the time -- it may be a breakthrough in understanding a situation, a breakthrough answer to a problem, a breakthrough idea, a breakthrough insight, a breakthrough in financial or material provision, a breakthrough in health. If you have any need in your life, you need a breakthrough from God to meet that need! Fasting and prayer break the yoke of bondage and bring about a release of God's presence, power, and provision.

I certainly have seen this borne out in the course of my ministry.

When I was forty-two years old, I went to an Assemblies of God camp in Alexandria, Minnesota, to speak for a women's retreat. The first two days of the retreat went very well, and then I had one day in between the first retreat and the second -- so many women had registered, the camp could not host all of the women at the same time. I took that day in this lovely place in Minnesota to enjoy the lakes and trees -- it was a gorgeous environment -- and to fast and pray about God's will for my life. I felt as if I was doing a lot of good things, but I also thought I might miss God's best for me. I longed to hear from God and to receive a revelation from Him about my life.

In that day of fasting and prayer, God spoke to me words from Isaiah 11:9: "I have called you to cover the earth with the Word." Through the years, the Lord has confirmed that word to me a number of times, but this was my initial call to take the message of God's Word to the whole earth, and it came as the result of one day of prayer and fasting.

The breakthrough that you may need in your life is a sense of God's direction -- not only for today and tomorrow, but for the broad scope of your life. If you long to know God's purpose for you on this earth, I strongly encourage you to seek God in prayer and fasting.

THE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL FASTING

There are two main overriding principles related to prayer and fasting in the Bible.

First, biblical fasting is going without food. The noun translated "fast" or "a fasting" is *tsom* in the Hebrew and *nesteia* in the Greek language. It means the voluntary abstinence from food. The literal Hebrew translation would be "not to eat." The literal Greek means "no food."

I know people who say they go without television or movies, and they call these "fasting" times. I'm not opposed to that definition of fasting--fasting does imply that we are giving up one thing in order to replace it with something else, and in the Bible sense, specifically to replace it with prayer. But in the main, I believe fasting has to do with our abstaining from food. Second, biblical fasting is linked with serious seasons of prayer. The more seriously we approach prayer and fasting, the more serious the results we will experience.

I sometimes hear people say, "I'm giving up chocolate" and they regard this as a type of fasting. I think this is a rather frivolous approach. The first and foremost purpose of a biblical or spiritual fast is to get a breakthrough on a particular matter that one lifts up to the Lord in prayer. A spiritual fast involves our hearts and the way in which we relate to and trust God. It relates to discerning and receiving strength to follow through on what God might reveal to us about circumstances in our lives or a direction we are to take.

I am not against people fasting in order to lose weight. Many people fast to lose weight or maintain their weight. What I am opposed to is making the losing of weight your primary goal in a season of spiritual

fasting and prayer. To have weight loss as a goal makes your fasting a diet plan, not a time of genuine fasting and prayer. If losing weight is your purpose in fasting, you will be missing out on the full reason for fasting, and you likely will be concerned only with what you don't eat rather than with what you are led to pray.

Now there's certainly an issue of food that is associated with many seasons of prayer and fasting, and let me quickly add this: control of eating is a valid reason to fast. The purpose is not the number of pounds you might lose during a fast, but rather, trusting God to help you regain mastery over food during a fast. Jesus said, "The spirit is . . . willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). Fasting is a means of bringing the flesh into submission to the Lord so He can strengthen us in our mastery over our own selves. Fasting in the flesh makes us stronger to stand against the temptations of the flesh. Those temptations very often deal with food.

Abstaining from food is often God's way of showing that His desire for us is that we regain mastery over all things associated with our flesh in order to subdue our flesh and elevate our emphasis on spiritual matters. God's promise is to help us as we overcome the flesh and put all carnal temptations into subjection.

ABSTAINING FROM FOOD TO REGAIN MASTERY OF THE FLESH

We are wise to recognize that food was the enticement the devil used to cause Eve and Adam to sin in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2 the Lord God told Adam and Eve that they could eat freely of every tree in the garden of Eden, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). God did not tell Adam and Eve to refrain from touching a particular animal or smelling a particular flower or swimming in a certain stream. He told them to refrain from taking a particular fruit into their bodies-one type of fruit out of all the many types He had made available to them.

God had given Adam and Eve authority over all things that He had created-every bird, fish, beast of the field, and over "every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat" (Gen. 1:29). God did not prohibit Adam and Eve from interacting with any part of God's creation when He commanded them to be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it-except for this one tree and its fruit. They were not to eat of a particular tree, what God described to them as the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Why did God set apart this one tree and its fruit? God was giving Adam and Eve free will and the ability to make choices and decisions. Free will isn't really free if a person has no choice.

Adam and Eve had a choice to make about this one tree. God told them to abstain from eating from its fruit because He did not want His beloved creation to have a knowledge of evil. He had already given them a full knowledge of everything He called "good." He wanted to spare them the heartache of knowing evil. That's true for us today as Christians. God calls us to pursue only what is good. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "Whatsoever things are true . . . honest . . . just . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Phil. 4:8). God desires only good for His children. He tells us in His Word, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21).

Even as God calls us away from evil and toward good, He gives us a choice. So many of the problems we have in our world today are the result of men and women making the wrong choices. They have knowingly and unknowingly chosen what is evil. And the end result is the same for us as it was for Adam and Eve: death and all forms of sin that lead to death (see Rom. 6:23).

Let me point out to you two results from the disastrous choice that Adam and Eve made about the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

1. *Diverted Attention*

First, Eve listened to what the devil had to say to her about the fruit itself. The devil diverted her attention from whatever it was that Eve was doing. He called her attention to the tree and its fruit. The Bible tells us the devil came to her in the guise of a beautiful and subtle serpent and said to her, "Hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (Gen. 3:1). There's no indication that Eve had given much thought to the tree before the devil asked her this question. There's no record that she longed for it or had any curiosity about it. She certainly didn't crave it, because she had never tasted it!

In many ways, the devil uses this same tactic today. He calls our attention to how beautiful and refreshing certain foods and beverages appear. It's difficult to go through a day without seeing enticing food and beverage commercials on billboards, on television, and in magazines. Foods are presented in the most tempting ways in stores, restaurants, and on menus. The devil says the same thing to us he said to Eve: "Has God really said you can't have a bite of this?"

A woman once said to me, "If there's a piece of pie in my house, it calls out to me. It says to me, even in the middle of night, 'Eat me. Come eat me.' I can't resist."

Now I'm certainly not linking the devil to a piece of pie, but I am saying this: the devil will always call your attention repeatedly to the thing that is harmful for you, but he will do it in a way that makes you feel deprived if you don't indulge in eating, drinking, or partaking of what is harmful. The implication of the devil is always: "This is so good. Has God really said you can't have any of this good thing?"

Never forget that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the knowledge of good and evil. There was an element of good in that fruit, not just evil. The devil told Eve specifically that the fruit of the tree was "good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6). All Eve had to do was look to see that the fruit was pleasant. She made a bad assumption, however, that what was visually pleasant would also be "good for food." In that, the devil was very wrong!

What about us? There's an element of good in foods and substances that are ultimately bad for us, even if it's just the good appearance, smell, or taste. Have you ever noticed how beautiful all the colored and distinctly shaped bottles look in a bar? Those bottles always seem lighted in just the right way to make them look very special, very festive, very appealing. Many foods are pleasant to the eyes. Many drinks are presented in ways that make them appear pleasing. We buy into the lie that what is pleasing is also nutritious and beneficial.

Fasting calls us to turn away from food. Fasting calls us to redirect our attention back to the things of God and His commandments. Fasting calls us to face and overcome the devil's call: "Has God really said you can't have this?" Fasting calls us to abstain from all things harmful for us, and in most cases, from all food for a period of time. The devil's insistent question is likely to become very loud in our minds as we begin a fast: "Has God really said you can't eat? Not anything? Not the things you love the most? Has God really called you to fast- to abstain totally from this thing that you have labeled as 'good'?"

Our answer must be a firm "Yes! God has called me to fast. He has called me to give my full attention to Him and to His commandments. He has called me to obey Him fully in all things. And God has called me to say no to you, devil!"

2. *Temptations Toward False Benefits*

Eve listened to what the devil had to say to her about the benefits of eating what God had prohibited. The devil always points out the would-be and usually short-term benefits of sin. Many substances that are ultimately harmful for us taste good or feel good or bring pleasure. In some cases, the partaking of the substance makes us feel like adults, feel accepted by others, or feel more powerful and in greater

control. Some people say about certain foods and substances that they "give me quick energy," "make me more alert," or "help me relax."

The devil told Eve that the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would make her wise- she would be as a "god," knowing good and evil.

In the short term, the devil was right. Eve suddenly had a knowledge of evil. She really knew in her own experience as a human being that evil existed. This was the first time in her life she had ever known the contrast-up to that point, all things had been good.

What the devil failed to mention to Eve was the ultimate consequence that God had associated with eating of this fruit: "You shall surely die." The devil failed to mention any downside to her disobedience. In fact, he dismissed God's consequences with a sarcastic question.

The devil comes at us the same way. The devil never tells us that drinking alcohol can make a person an alcoholic. He never tells a person that smoking cigarettes can cause him or her to have lung cancer. He never tells a person that eating too much of the wrong foods can lead to chronic illness and premature death. The devil points out only short-term benefits, never long-term disasters.

When we fast, we are suddenly aware once again of what is good and evil. We have a heightened awareness not only of God's goodness and of God's commandments, but of the evil that abounds in the world around us.

A man once said to me about fasting, "It seems that when I fast the world seems much more black and white, at least for a period of time. I see right and wrong much more clearly. I see good and bad, blessings and cursings, benefits and negative consequences, what is godly and what is ungodly. I am much more discerning about what lines up with God's commandments and what falls into the category of 'man's commands.'"

I asked him what happened after he stopped fasting. He laughed and said, "I am still very clear on these things, but there's also a time after I end fasting that the whole world seems more vivid and more colorful than ever before. I can distinguish tastes again. The sky seems bluer than before. The air seems crisper in the mountains. All of my senses seem to be heightened toward what is God's creation- which is always good- and what is man's invention-which very often has an element of evil to it."

Those who fast often experience greater discernment of good and evil. In fact, it seems to be a major by-product of fasting. God seems to give us an opportunity as we fast to take a look again at our lives and the world around us and to discern what is good and what is evil.

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