

Fasting for a Reward

Two years ago I was reminded of the power and reward of fasting when a mother came to me seeking healing for her demonized son. No matter how hard this 20-something man tried to turn his life around through counseling and self-help practices, nothing was working. Drugs, pornography, reckless sexual practices and exposure to the world of the occult had taken over.

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Along with three members of my ministry team, I rebuked the demons and compelled them to leave. But there was willful opposition like I'd never seen in all my years of leading deliverance sessions. Andy (not his real name) thrashed about like a wild animal. He growled and made other animalistic sounds amid verbal threats expressed in different voices.

After two hours of dealing with this poor young man, a few demons left. But though he now looked and behaved like any ordinary person, it was clear Andy was still not totally delivered.

As I later counseled with his parents, I realized what I had to do. I instructed my team to fast for a week, eating once per day. During our prayer time, we asked the Lord to prepare Andy for a complete deliverance and breakthrough.

Each day I felt myself getting stronger in the Lord and angrier at Satan. *How dare he try to destroy Andy's life and future!* I thought.

When the next Tuesday evening rolled around, we were ready to

battle with Satan. *Tonight is Andy's night!* I said to myself. *He will be set free!*

Immediately after Andy sat down, I asked him, "Are you willing to submit yourself totally to God and resist the devil?" Without hesitation, he said yes. According to James 4:7, this was the doorway to freedom. Andy gave his heart to Christ. This time there was no pretense or faux prayer of salvation. This was the real deal.

Quietly but with complete authority, I began to exorcise the demons that had infiltrated Andy's life. Within 30 minutes, he was totally healed and delivered. I spent a few minutes teaching him about the baptism of the Holy Spirit—a gift subsequent to salvation (Acts 2:1-4). I then led him in a simple prayer that resulted in his being filled with the Spirit, evidenced by speaking in other tongues. We all walked away knowing firsthand the reward of fasting.

Fasting Basics

Fasting, at its most basic level, means "to cover your mouth." Nutritionist and author Paul Bragg, in his classic book *The Miracle of Fasting*, advocates fasting at least one day each week because of its physical, mental and spiritual benefits. According to Dr. Bragg, "Properly conducted fasts purify the body, restoring it to health after everything has failed."

Fasting rids the body of harmful toxins and gives our digestive system a much-needed rest, which results in the avoidance of many illnesses. Historically, fasting has also been used successfully in other nonspiritual ways. Though not a Christian, Mohandas Gandhi, widely known as the father of modern India, used fasting as a means of political protest. Gandhi described fasting as "the prayer of a soul in agony." He mourned and hungered for his people to be freed from subjection to British rule in India.

But the spiritual side of fasting is even more power than the

natural side of fasting because it directly involves God.

Jesus taught that fasting invokes God's help. In fact, His exact words were, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt. 6:16-18, NIV).

Jesus allows us to look behind the heavenly veil and learn how God views fasting. It catches God's eye. He sees when we deliberately choose to abstain from eating for spiritual purposes. He then interprets our fasting as a direct request—a type of prayer of the soul—for His help.

Fasting Rewards

Jesus concluded the passage in Matthew by sharing that God will reward us for our fast. The Greek word for *reward*, *apodidomi*, means "to perform, render, restore and to give or do something necessary in fulfillment of an obligation or expectation."

If there is to be an expectation on our part for God's rewards, why does fasting play such a small role among American Christians? Why is it seldom practiced? There are three simple answers to this question.

First, fasting is tough when you don't have a clean diet. If your diet is very unhealthy, which the typical American diet is, fasting is difficult because your body has become addicted to processed foods. The more sugary foods you eat, the more your body craves them. One's inability to fast successfully, therefore, may not be an indication of an unwillingness but rather of a poor diet that keeps a person in an addictive state of craving more pizza, fried foods, hamburgers and ice

cream.

Second, fasting done outside the guidelines of Scripture will not yield any significant benefits. If there are little or no rewards, Christians will not fast. Isaiah 58 (explored in greater depth later in this article) outlines the theological and spiritual guidelines surrounding fasting. When we fast according to these principles, we are assured of God's promised rewards.

Unfortunately, many Christians fast independent of God's rules for fasting, and when they don't see the rewards, they deny the power of fasting and discontinue the practice.

Third, fasting is often ignored because we have forgotten the three primary rewards it yields. I have learned to practice a lifestyle of fasting because 1) fasting produces intimacy with God, 2) fasting promotes humility and 3) fasting yields deliverance and breakthrough. Let's explore each of these rewards in greater depth.

Reward #1: Fasting Produces Intimacy With God

The very idea of a reward for fasting raises a cautionary flag. The motivation of the Pharisees, Jesus said, was "to show others they are fasting" (Matt. 6:16). They wanted others to see how pious they were. It is a paradox that we lose the spiritual blessings of the spiritual disciplines when our motivation is to show how spiritual we are!

So Jesus goes in the opposite direction. "When you pray," He says, "go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father" (v. 6). He also instructs, "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting" (vv. 17-18).

When the Pharisees fasted, everybody knew. When we fast, Jesus says, no one needs to know. Certainly we can share with our family that we're fasting. This will avoid confusion and

careless planning when it comes to mealtimes. But what Jesus is teaching here has to do with motivation. When we fast, we do not put our name and discipline up in lights. Instead, our motive is private. We are saying we will partake less of physical joy in order to partake more deeply of the spiritual joy of intimacy with God.

I am convinced one reason more Christians don't fast is they haven't yet realized the race of life can't be won without the energizing, sustaining presence of Jesus in their lives. This is remarkable in light of the fact that Jesus specifically predicted we would fast after He was taken up from the earth, leaving us to run the race without His physical presence. The presence of God in your life produces the necessary feelings of intimacy with God.

John the Baptist's followers asked, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" (Matt. 9:14). Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved" (vv. 15-17).

These inquiring disciples knew fasting had certain spiritual benefits. But in explaining why His own disciples were not fasting, Jesus not only indicated they would one day engage in this spiritual discipline too, but also that the benefit they would eventually experience from it would realize His spiritual presence for them after He returned to the Father. It would become for them a form of denying self in order to experience intimacy and the feeling of connectedness with Him.

President Abraham Lincoln understood this dimension of

fasting. During the crisis between the North and South that would result in the Civil War, Lincoln issued, on March 30, 1863, a proclamation for “a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer.” Lincoln mourned the absence of peace and was willing to fast as a means of praying for its presence.

Yet many Christians these days have little sense of the agony of living apart from the presence of Christ. Too often there is little room in our lives for the feeling of “I miss my times with the Lord—times that used to be so passionate, times when hot tears would flow in sorrow for my sins, times when I realized my desperate need for cleansing and for His presence.”

I understand we could hardly sustain this kind of intensity on an everyday basis. Yet there could be seasons of fasting, special periods when we give singular attention to our need for Christ’s presence as we run the race. Fasting brings this presence closer to us.

Reward #2: Fasting Promotes Humility

In the time of Isaiah the prophet, God’s people were rebelling against Him in their hearts while outwardly pretending they wanted Him in their lives. Though they had forsaken God for idols, they clung to some of His ways in the hope that an outward show of piety would prompt God to come to their aid against their enemies.

But it wasn’t happening because the people’s hearts had not been changed. Isaiah records their complaint: “‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we *humbled* ourselves, and you have not noticed?’” (Is. 58:3, emphasis added).

Notice the people associated fasting with humility. Had they fasted with sincerity, God would have heard their prayer because going without food would have indeed been a sign of humility.

Angel Martinez, a 20th-century preacher, gave us an excellent word picture of humility when he said, "God cannot save peacocks. You cannot strut to Calvary; you must come on your hands and knees." Humility is the doorway to God's grace and blessings. In fact, James tells us, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6, NKJV).

Fasting reinforces in our hearts that we are more dependent on God than on physical sustenance. Fasting with integrity humbles us, and in the situation Isaiah recorded, God was not blessing His fasting people because they lacked integrity. There was no connection between their fasting and their behavior.

Notice what God goes on to say through Isaiah: "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" (Isa. 58:3-4, NIV).

The humility fasting is supposed to produce is also supposed to result in a changed life—in increased sensitivity to God's will and in how we behave toward others. God states this expectation clearly: "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 ... ?" (vv. 6-7).

The problem was that God's people had no intention of allowing their religiosity to go that far. They wanted the outward display of going without food to prompt God to rescue them from their enemies. But because their advertised humility did not result in sensitivity to human needs and justice, their voices and pleas were not heard on high.

Reward #3: Fasting Yields Deliverance and Breakthrough

Notice that God intended for fasting to result in a kind of “double deliverance.” First, it should deliver the believer who fasts from dependence on and bondage to the flesh. Then, as God’s words spoke in Isaiah 58 of loosening chains, untying cords and setting free the oppressed, it should result in breakthrough from any bondage that hinders the free flow of God’s miracles and promises in a person’s life.

My entrance into the breakthrough power of fasting came 30 years ago, when I was working as an environmental engineer and subconsciously knew there was a call on my life to pastoral ministry. After a year or so of living with the gnawing feeling that God had something else for me, I went to the smartest Christian I knew to rid myself of the feeling of frustration and confusion. I wanted to hear his counsel to the question: Should I become a minister or remain an engineer?

This math professor who had memorized most of the New Testament listened attentively to me—a 23-year-old puzzled young Christian. After hearing my dilemma, he said, “David, God has lots of ministers. Serve the Lord as an engineer.”

I walked away, relieved I could finally put my confusion and dilemma to rest. However, in less than one week, the confusion resurfaced.

I decided to take three days off from work and spend those days fasting for God’s wisdom. At the end of those three days of fasting and prayer, the Lord spoke to me in an audible voice and said, “David, go and preach My word.”

And as they say in show business, “That’s a wrap!” The issue was settled.

Isaiah said true fasting would provide this kind of breakthrough: “The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail” (Is. 58:11).

Just like the Lord guided me to transition from engineering into ministry. And just like that young man Andy experienced on the day of his deliverance after my team fasted and prayed for his complete freedom. He became like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

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