

Crying Out From the Wilderness

Since Jentezen Franklin started preaching in the hills of North Carolina, he's been calling America back to old-fashioned repentance.

Every January, megachurch pastor Jentezen Franklin pushes aside meats, breads and sweets and spends 21 days in fasting and prayer. "For me, fasting has just been a huge part of everything God has done in my life," he says. "Fasting means I am putting everything on hold, and I am spending the time with God. It brings everything in focus, and I become eternity-minded." Since Franklin, 45, became pastor of Free Chapel Worship Center in Gainesville, Georgia, in 1989, the church has grown from 180 members to roughly 9,000. And he credits fasting with helping to keep the ministry's vision clear.

"It is so easy to get caught up in the busyness of ministry," he says. "It's dangerous to have a growing ministry and a shrinking passion for God; something gets out of whack. When I find myself becoming mechanical in my preaching, even a one-day fast fine-tunes me and makes my heart sensitive. For me, fasting is the key."

For the last decade, more than 90 percent of the Free Chapel congregation has joined him in some portion of an annual 21-day fast that begins the second Sunday in January. Participants choose a full fast of juices and water only or the Daniel fast, which excludes meats, sweets and breads from the diet.

The first year Free Chapel participated in the "first fruits fast," Franklin says: "The worship and intensity for God went

to another level. The altars were filled with the lost, and every year it has just grown and grown.”

Today interest in the annual consecration has spread around the world, with Christians as far away as Australia, South Africa and Indonesia taking part. The fast has become so popular that last year a special link on Franklin’s ministry Web site received 7 million hits. The pastor believes reclaiming the discipline of fasting—on an individual or corporate level—ultimately will help strengthen the body of Christ.

“The discipline of fasting releases the anointing, the favor and the blessing of God in the life of a Christian,” Franklin says. “Fasting is the secret key that unlocks heaven’s door and shuts the gates of hell.”

A Consecrated Lifestyle

Franklin speaks from experience. The son of a Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) pastor, Franklin began sensing a call to ministry at age 20 and sought confirmation through a three-day fast from all foods and drinks except water. On the third night of the fast, Franklin says God spoke to him when he fell to his knees on the darkened platform of a church near his hometown of Wilson, North Carolina.

“I can take you to the exact spot on that platform late that night where I heard God say in my heart, ‘Go home now, and I’ll confirm your call through your mother,’” Franklin recalls. “When I entered my home a few minutes later, the light was on in my parents’ bedroom.

“My mother was weeping and trembling as she told me that God

woke her up with a vision of me coming down the road to the house. ... Her words to me were, 'The Lord has spoken to me to tell you to do what He has called you to do.'

"It was during these three days that God broke down my resistance and made me willing; I had the courage, but it was courage with cold feet."

He soon became popular as an evangelist in the Church of God, known for his skill playing the saxophone and his preaching in churches across the country. In 1989, Franklin was scheduled to preach in a series of services at Free Chapel Congregational Holiness Church, where he was a frequent guest speaker. But on the Friday before the Sunday he was to arrive, the church's pastor, Roy Wellborn, died suddenly.

"One of the pastor's specific wishes was that if he ever passed away, there would be no cancellation of Sunday services," Franklin recalls. "So with a heavy heart I took the pulpit two days later, and we had revival. Before I left, I knew God had called me to pastor the church."

Although he did not reveal his burden to pastor to anyone, Franklin was asked to lead the congregation. Since then Free Chapel, located approximately 40 miles northeast of Atlanta, has expanded to three Sunday services, built a 3,200-seat sanctuary on a 154-acre campus and launched a television broadcast, Kingdom Connection, which airs in more than 100 countries and averages 2 million weekly viewers.

The church also offers small-group ministry; oversees drug and alcohol programs for men, women and teens; and runs an international Bible college. Last year Free Chapel contributed

roughly \$1 million to foreign missions. The ministry also supports an orphanage in Ukraine and a medical mission in Peru. At home, church volunteers help feed more than 400 area families monthly.

But Franklin says it's what the church does privately that enables the ministry to fulfill its mission. The pastor calls fasting "the private discipline that brings public reward," and he's adamant that it's not just for pastors and others in church leadership. "In the Beatitudes [in Matthew 6] ... Jesus provided the pattern by which each of us is to live," Franklin writes in his book *Fasting*. "Jesus said, 'When you give' and 'When you pray' and 'When you fast.' As much attention should be given to fasting as is given to giving and praying. We may be missing our greatest breakthroughs because we fail to fast."

Franklin began practicing the annual fast privately, but soon a few church members asked to join him. Today the yearly consecration is a major emphasis of the church.

Beth Harris, her husband, Andy, and their two daughters have attended Free Chapel for six years, driving 40 minutes from their home in Lawrenceville, Georgia. This month marks their sixth year participating in the fast.

"We do a full fast for three days and then continue the 21 days with the Daniel fast," Beth says. "The girls have continued this even at college and have often involved their sororities, roommates or boyfriends."

"It's tough for them to participate while at school, but I've seen them grow in maturity in their walk with the Lord and

believe that this time of focus has changed their lives and their personal decisions.

“Our family has come through some tough times in the last five years, and I believe with all my heart this time set aside to concentrate and focus on the things of God has made a huge difference in our personal walk and our overall closeness as a family.”

Andy Harris agrees. “I don’t believe any of us had ever fasted more than a meal,” he says. “There truly is something about the sustained fast that helps you focus on your relationship with God. It is interesting how He provides the strength to be able to follow the fast, and on some level it is easy. The ability to manage it comes from the Lord, and I really don’t struggle with it.”

Justin Griffith, a star fullback for the National Football League’s Oakland Raiders, says the fast has helped him find balance. The former Atlanta Falcon attends Free Chapel even though his current team is located in California. Griffith has invited numerous other pro athletes to the church, including his former teammates, who train at a facility located just a few miles from the Free Chapel campus.

“I thank God for the insight He has given pastor Franklin about fasting and how it can change your life,” Griffith says. “Listening to his teaching has allowed me to gain insight and experience it for myself. He challenged us with the 21-day fast and, man, what an experience! To sacrifice the time and food for God was all worth it.”

Griffith says he stayed committed to the fast even while

recovering from a broken ankle sustained during a game. “I fasted during rehab,” he says, “and when it was time for my checkup the doc said he had never seen healing so quickly.”

Elizabeth Lauster, who has been a member of Free Chapel for seven years and has participated in the fast for six, says each year members are challenged to “go deeper, to commit more, to do more than we did the previous year.

“Knowing you are fasting with thousands of others makes the journey easier,” she says. “The time of corporate prayer in the church body during the fast also helps us stay focused and committed to it the whole 21 days.”

Lauster says the fruit of the fast typically manifests not during the 21-day consecration but later in the year. “I believe what is happening right now in my life is a consequence of the fast in January,” she said last fall.

Free Chapel executive pastor Richie Hughes says the fast has had the unexpected result of making the church staff more productive. “So much of our day revolves around food—preparing it, planning where to eat and socializing around the table,” Hughes says.

“The time we recoup from not eating and the focus on spiritual things makes the fasting season our most productive time of the year corporately among our staff. Each year our attendance, church prayer life and giving is at its peak during the 21 days.”

After the January 2007 fast, the Free Chapel Worship team recorded a CD titled Moving Forward, which was co-written and

co-produced by Grammy-winning worship leader Israel Houghton. “The goal was to capture worship after 21 days of thousands fasting together,” Hughes says. When it released in July, the project spent three months on Billboard Magazine’s Top 20 Christian/Gospel music charts.

Starting the Year Off Right

Franklin says “seeking first the kingdom of God” at the beginning of the year sets the tone for the next 11 months. “I’m stopping business as usual, and I’m going to go on a journey with God, seeking Him in wisdom and prayer,” he says. “The more serious you take a fast, the more serious will be the results. God honors the depth.”

While many pastors report declines in giving and church attendance at the start of each year, Franklin says Free Chapel has seen the opposite. “It’s astonishing the growth we experience in January,” he says. “I’m not exaggerating when I say I think thousands of pastors have done the fast, and the positive reports we get—by the hundreds—come from all over.”

Hughes notes that fasting often helps Free Chapel members accomplish their New Year’s goals. “People are naturally seeking ways to start the year right,” he says. “Many make New Year’s resolutions, set fitness or business goals, but the ‘forced focus’ of fasting enhances the ability of all of the participants to achieve those goals.”

Free Chapel member Bryan Boyd, who is president of Gunter Construction in Atlanta, says he and his wife, Susan, followed Franklin’s advice to pray specific prayers while participating in the 21-day fast in 2001. “He said to ask and believe God

for something we wanted, not just something we needed,” Boyd says. The parents of three daughters, the Boyds prayed for a healthy baby boy. Ten months later their son, Jackson, was born.

In January 2004 Boyd testified that God brought a breakthrough in his business as a result of the annual fast. “My wife and I entered the 21-day fast specifically seeking God’s direction for our business,” Boyd says. “As we fasted, God planted specific thoughts in my mind of how to grow our company [of 40 employees] cost-effectively. God gave us a plan to expand into several new geographic areas and opened the doors to several new customers.

“At the end of 2004 we had over 200 employees, our gross sales had increased by a factor of 10, and our profits were the highest they had ever been. God had designed and shared a specific business plan with me, and He shared it with me while fasting.”

In the last year, Franklin says God has brought unexpected expansion in the ministry. Last September he announced the launch of Free Chapel Orange County in Irvine, California, a Church of God congregation Franklin was asked to lead upon the retirement of its former pastor, Floyd Lawhon.

Franklin and Church of God Presiding Bishop G. Dennis McGuire said the partnership might be part of God’s plan to bring another Pentecostal outpouring in Southern California, much like the 1906 Azusa Street Revival that began in Los Angeles. “God has used you, pastor, to really shake things up,” McGuire said during a September broadcast of Trinity Broadcasting Network’s Praise the Lord program. “God is doing something marvelous, and we expect a great move of God in Los Angeles

through Free Chapel Orange County.”

Every Sunday, Franklin arrives at Free Chapel in Gainesville by 5 a.m. for prayer, preaches two sermons and shakes hundreds of hands before boarding a private jet at 2 p.m. with his family and two staff members. They arrive at John Wayne Airport, located five minutes from Free Chapel Orange County (OC), and by 6 p.m. Franklin is in the pulpit.

The next day is filled with Orange County staff meetings, and the group returns to Gainesville on Tuesday. “This may sound like a crazy schedule, but it is actually exhilarating,” Franklin says.

Married for 20 years to wife Cherise and a father of five children ranging in age from 17 to 9, Franklin kept a full calendar of speaking engagements before he became pastor of Free Chapel OC. With his traveling pared down, he says his current schedule leaves him more time for his family. “My family comes first, and what shows me that this is of God is the way they can be with me more now than ever,” Franklin says. “The school systems have actually worked it out that my children can be off the two days so they can be with me.

“We have the three-hour flight to and from California, where we can have one-on-one time. And on top of that the children are plugged in to the music and children’s ministry at Free Chapel OC.”

This month, Franklin says he hopes Christians will set aside the time to seek God through prayer and fasting. “My greatest desire is to see people all over the world participate in this special time of seeking God,” he says. “Right now, I am

excited about the move of God through a fast that reaches from coast to coast.”

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Reclaiming the Lost Discipline of Fasting

Simply stated, biblical fasting is refraining from food for a spiritual purpose. When you eliminate eating from your diet for a number of days, your spirit becomes both uncluttered by the things of this world and amazingly sensitive to the things of God.

The Bible records numerous circumstances under which God’s people fasted. The duration of the fasts recorded by Scripture, as well as the type of fasting undertaken, differed a great deal.

Moses fasted 40 days when he received God’s law (see Deut. 9:9). Joshua and the elders of Israel fasted for about 12 hours after Israel’s armies were defeated at Ai (see Josh. 7:6). The apostle Paul fasted 14 days while he was in peril (see Acts 27:33-36). Jesus fasted too—for 40 days before beginning His ministry (see Matt. 4:2).

These examples indicate that the duration of a fast often has a lot to do with what a person is facing. They also exemplify the three types of fasts modeled in Scripture—absolute, normal and partial.

Absolute. This is an extreme fast that should be done only for very short periods of time. You take in nothing—no food, no water. It should be attempted only with medical supervision.

Normal. No food of any kind is eaten for a certain number of days. You do drink water—and plenty of it. Depending on the length of a normal fast, you may also choose to drink clear broth and juices to maintain your strength.

Partial. A partial fast can be interpreted many ways but usually involves giving up particular foods and drinks for a time. The most commonly used example is recorded in Daniel 1:11-14, in which Daniel and his three companions ate only vegetables and drank only water for 10 days and, as a result, were blessed more than the king's men, who ate the richer, royal diet.

There is no real formula for determining the amount of time you should fast or the type of fast that's best for you. It is important, however, not to get bogged down in the details. Here are a few suggestions for keeping it simple:

Begin with one day—from sunrise to sunset. As a teenager, I would fast all day on Sunday until after church. It made me so much more spiritually sensitive to God.

Don't start with more than you can handle. There is no need to be heroic and attempt a 40-day fast if you have never fasted a day in your life. Just start.

Make it mean something to you, or don't do it. If it doesn't mean anything to you, it won't mean anything to God. Without being combined with prayer and the Word, fasting is little more than dieting.

Fasting, although primarily spiritual in nature, has numerous physical benefits as well.

Fasting gives your body time to heal. We Americans regularly consume and assimilate chemical preservatives, coloring, stabilizers, flavorings and other additives from our foods that build up in our bodies and cause illness and disease. Periodic fasts flush out the poisons. Plus, fasting gives your whole digestive system a break, and that is very healthy for you.

Fasting helps to control the appetite. Fasting can break an addiction to junk food as well as the power of an uncontrollable appetite. Some people bound by nicotine, alcohol and drugs have found freedom from their addictions through fasting.

Medical research has shown that fasting also sharpens your mental process and relieves anxiety and tension. It lowers your blood pressure and can lower your cholesterol, and also aids and improves your sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

Headaches are one unpleasant physical symptom that often accompanies fasting—but the good news is, they are temporary. People have told me that the devil gave them a headache while they fasted. More likely, it was simply their bodies getting rid of the toxins that had built up over time.

If you will drink plenty of water, or water and juice, your body will flush out the poisons, and you'll reach what can only be described as a "sweet place" in the fast.

Be aware that whenever you fast for at least three days, your

digestive system shuts down. It can be unpleasant. Some people feel sluggish or can't sleep—and, let's face it, you are going to get hungry!

I encourage you to avoid all those food ads on TV while you're fasting. During an extended fast one time, I looked forward every night to watching a Pizza Hut commercial on TV. It became a highlight of my fast until one night I dreamed I was enjoying a delicious slice of Pizza Hut's pan pizza—and suddenly I woke up to find nearly half my pillowcase stuffed into my mouth!

When I've been on extended fasts, I've seen no angels and heard no violins during the first few days while my body emptied itself of toxins. In fact, I didn't feel much like focusing on prayer and the Word. But without fail, things soon cleared up, and I found a deeper place in God.

Regardless of how long you choose to fast, try to drink at least one gallon of purified water throughout the first day. Avoid tap water and drink purified or distilled water instead.

Water flushes the toxins from your system, which helps you get off to a good start. It also makes you feel full.

Above all, keep in mind that fasting is a continual prayer before God. There may be days when heaven opens and your heart is prompted to deep times of prayer.

There also may be days when your energy is sapped and you just cannot focus in prayer at all. At those times, don't condemn yourself. God sees your sacrifice.

Each year I encourage the members of my church to join in a

21-day fast. If in less than one month you can be a new person, why not take a radical step of faith?

We have only one life to give to God—let's get control of our bodies and go for God with the best we have.