

Releasing God's Power Through Fasting

By Bill Bright

A discussion on prayer would not be complete without including a subject that is an important companion to prayer in the Bible: fasting.

Combining fasting with prayer can result in a spiritual atomic bomb that pulls down spiritual strongholds and releases the power of God in your life and the life of your church, its pastor, its leaders, and its members.

Down through the centuries, godly people who have done mighty things for the Lord have testified to the necessity of prayer with fasting. John Wesley, who shook the world for God during the Great Awakening, which gave rise to the Methodist Church toward the end of the eighteenth century, is representative of such great spiritual leaders.

John Wesley so believed in this power that he urged early Methodists to fast and pray every Wednesday and Friday. He felt so strongly about fasting those two days a week that he refused to ordain anyone in Methodism who wouldn't agree to do it.

The roll call of other great Christian leaders who determined to make prayer with fasting a part of their lives reads like a hall of fame: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, Matthew Henry, Charles Finney, Andrew Murray, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and many more.

Why were they so convinced of the need for fasting and prayer? And how does fasting cause the fire of God to fall upon the life of the individual and the Church?

OUR NEED TO FAST

The writings of Scripture, the church fathers, and many Christian leaders of today offer several biblical insights into the spiritual need for fasting:

- IT IS A BIBLICAL WAY TO TRULY HUMBLE ONESELF IN THE SIGHT OF GOD (PS. 35:13;EZRA 8:21).
- IT BRINGS REVELATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT OF A PERSON'S TRUE SPIRITUAL CONDITION, RESULTING IN BROKENNESS, REPENTANCE, AND CHANGE.
- IT IS A CRUCIAL MEANS FOR PERSONAL REVIVAL BECAUSE IT BRINGS THE INNER WORKINGS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT INTO PLAY IN A MOST UNUSUAL, POWERFUL WAY.
- IT HELPS US BETTER UNDERSTAND THE WORD OF GOD BY MAKING IT MORE MEANINGFUL, VITAL, AND PRACTICAL.
- IT TRANSFORMS PRAYER INTO A RICHER AND MORE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

- IT CAN RESULT IN DYNAMIC PERSONAL REVIVAL--BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT AND REGAINING A STRONG SENSE OF SPIRITUAL DETERMINATION.
- IT CAN RESTORE THE LOSS OF ONE'S FIRST LOVE FOR THE LORD.

Throughout the Old and New Testament eras and during the last two thousand years, fasting was a primary means of humbling oneself before God.

In Isaiah 58:5, the prophet describes fasting as a "day for a man to afflict his soul" (NKJV). And in Psalm 69:10, David says he "chastened" his soul with fasting (NKJV). And in Psalm 35:13, he says he "humbled" his soul by abstaining from food.

Humility is an attitude of the heart. The Scripture says, "A broken and contrite heart--these, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17 NKJV). God will hear us and respond to our cry when we come before Him in humility and brokenness--acknowledging and repenting of our sins, and asking Him to cleanse us by the blood of Jesus and to fill us with His Holy Spirit.

HOW DOES FASTING HELP?

Fasting is also a primary means of restoration. By humbling our souls, fasting releases the Holy Spirit to do His special work of revival in us. This changes our relationship with God forever, taking us into a deeper life in Christ and giving us a greater awareness of God's reality and presence in our lives.

Fasting reduces the power of self so that the Holy Spirit can do a more intense work within us. It also helps in other ways:

- IT BRINGS A YIELDEDNESS, EVEN A HOLY BROKENNESS, RESULTING IN INNER CALM AND SELF-CONTROL.
- IT RENEWS SPIRITUAL VISION AND FAITH.
- IT INSPIRES DETERMINATION TO FOLLOW GOD'S REVEALED PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE.

The discipline of fasting made a powerful impact in the life of Andrew Murray, who wrote, "Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice everything, [even] ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."

FASTING BRINGS POWER

The early church recognized fasting as a means to obtaining spiritual power. In his book *God's Chosen Fast*, Arthur Wallis writes, "Fasting is calculated to bring a note of urgency and [persistence] into our praying, and to give force to our pleas in the court of heaven."

But over the years, Wallis continues, "as spirituality waned and worldliness flourished in the churches, the power and gifts of the Spirit were withdrawn."

This same spiritual erosion can and does occur in the life of the believer today. But God's Word declares fasting and prayer as a powerful means for causing the fire of God to fall again in a person's life.

This fire produces the fruit of the Spirit--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22)--but especially the fruit of righteousness and spiritual power over lusts of the flesh and the lies of the enemy of our souls.

In his book *Fasting*, author and teacher Derek Prince describes fasting as "a tremendous lesson in establishing who is the master and who is the servant. Remember, your body is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master." And, according to Galatians 5:17, the flesh, or carnal nature, always strives to be in control.

As fasting and prayer bring surrender of body, soul, and spirit to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, they also generate a heightened sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit; they create a fresh, clean joy and a restored determination to serve God. In short, they bring personal revival. Our spiritual power does not lie in money, genius, plans, or dedicated work. Rather, power for spiritual conquest comes from the Holy Spirit as people seek God's face in consecrated diligent prayer with fasting.

FASTING IN GOD'S WORD

As revealed by just a cursory look at any concordance, fasting is mentioned frequently in God's Holy Word. Often it is associated with weeping and other acts of humility before God. In Joel 2:12-13 the Lord commanded:

Return to me with all your heart, With fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God.

In the Old Testament, fasting was the way individuals and the people humbled themselves (Ps. 35:13; 69:10; Isa. 58:5). God's people have always fasted to humble themselves, to receive cleansing of their sins by effective repentance, for spiritual renewal, and for special helps. Ezra called a fast to seek God's protection for the Jews returning from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21).

Concerning Ezra, Edith Schaeffer writes in *The Life of Prayer*:

This serious fasting and prayer, bowing humbly before God with repentance and concern for His mercy, took place in the context of practical need--for protection and guidance, for help in choices and for the supply of material things.

In the New Testament, Luke records the account of a prophetess named Anna who in her eighties "never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37).

Jesus set the example by fasting forty days after His baptism. For Jesus it was a matter of *when* believers would fast, not *if* they would do it. He spoke in these terms: "When you give to the needy...when you pray...when you fast" (Matthew

6:2,5,16).

Prophets and teachers fasted at Antioch (Acts 13:1-2), and Paul--who wrote much of the New Testament--said he was "in fastings often" (2 Cor. 11:27 NKJV).

For believers, then, the question is not "*Should* I fast?" but " *When will* I fast?"

WHEN TO FAST

Some teach that you should fast *only* when led or prompted by the Holy Spirit to do so. But being led by the Spirit and hearing the Spirit involve a highly subjective, personal area of the Christian life. Believers do not always hear accurately, especially if God is asking them to do something they do not want to do.

The flesh will surely try to override inner promptings to abstain from food. God may be calling you to fast, but the flesh may be saying, "That's just your imagination. How is fasting going to get you out of this situation?"

Once you learn the purpose and benefits of fasting, you are free to *proclaim* a fast whenever you sense the desire to draw close to God in a dynamic way or feel the need to seek special help from Him.

Those who consistently practice fasting know instinctively when to do so. They recognize certain spiritual conditions and life circumstances as the signal to "bear down" spiritually. I try to live according to Philippeans 2:13: "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

In his book *Fasting: A Biblical Historical Study*, by R.D. Chatham tells of a pastor's wife who kept a diary of her fasts. She recorded how she and her husband were changing pastorates and felt overwhelmed by their new responsibilities and realized they needed God's help. Together they fasted for ten days. She said that if she had not fasted--and as a result received special strength from the Lord--she would have "gone under."

Of course, the still, small voice of the Spirit, always consistent with the Word of God, will tell us what to do if we will only listen. There are times when the Holy Spirit *will* prompt you to fast. On another page in her diary, the pastor's wife reported, "Monday: I awoke feeling the need to go on a fast." Such prompting of the Holy Spirit can come anytime, anyplace.

It is particularly important to receive a leading of the Lord before beginning an extended spiritual fast. If you undertake a long fast simply on your own, you may run into difficulties. But if the Lord leads you into a protracted fast, He will give you the strength to carry it out.

In 1994 God impressed me over a period of several months that He wanted me to fast for forty days. But I was not sure I could fast for that long. Even so, I began my fast with the prayer, "Lord, I will fast as long as You will enable me. I am looking to You to help me. I am claiming Your promise recorded in Isaiah 40:31, "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with

wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (NKJV). God was faithful to His promise. That fast was the greatest forty days of my life spiritually up until that time.

I have since fasted with great blessing for forty days in 1995 and again in 1996. In 1997, as I write, I am beginning my fourth forty-day fast. My wife, Vonette, is joining me in this adventure to seek God's face.

CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR

I strongly recommend that you consult your doctor before fasting. Unfortunately, however, many doctors have not been trained in this area, so their understanding is limited.

In writing about fasting, the subject of doctors is a chief concern. Author Lee Bueno, who conducts seminars on the physical and spiritual benefits of fasting, makes a strong statement about the attitude of doctors toward fasting in his book *Fast Your Way to Health*:

All but one in a thousand doctors react negatively to the subject of fasting. They have never fasted, know little about the subject, and respond only to bizarre stories that they've heard. Lack of understanding creates unnecessary fear and results in unfounded, imaginary dangers and the use of scare tactics by doctors to [make you] avoid fasting.

My experience has been similar to Bueno's. Even so, I encourage you to consult with your physician before beginning an extended fast. And I strongly suggest that you arrange for a physical exam to make sure you are in good health. You may have a physical problem that makes fasting dangerous and unwise. But be forewarned: Even if you are in good health, your doctor may try to discourage you from fasting. If this happens, you may be faced with a dilemma similar to mine.

Over the years, I have fasted many times--often from one to four weeks at a time--without consulting a physician. Since my first forty-day fast was beyond anything I had ever undertaken, I called several Christian and secular doctors for their advice. They either knew nothing about fasting or tried to discourage me altogether, and I realized that I was on my own. Would I obey the leading of the Holy Spirit or follow the counsel of unbelieving doctors?

Most fasting authorities believe that if you know that you are healthy and you fast properly, you will benefit physically as well as spiritually.

These are certain persons who should never fast without professional supervision:

- PERSONS WHO ARE PHYSICALLY EMACIATED.
- THOSE WHO SUFFER WEAKNESS OR ANEMIA.
- PERSONS WHO HAVE TUMORS, BLEEDING ULCERS, CANCER, OR BLOOD DISEASES OR WHO HAVE RECENTLY SUFFERED MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION.
- WOMEN WHO ARE PREGNANT OR NURSING.

- THOSE WHO ARE AFRAID OF FASTING BECAUSE THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND ITS BENEFITS OR WHAT TO EXPECT AND WHO MAY EVEN BELIEVE IT AMOUNTS TO STARVATION. Fasting is not starvation, but if persons have genuine doubts and negative emotions--which must be overcome--no persuasion should cause them to fast until they become knowledgeable about fasting.
- There may be persons with other conditions who should not fast. The rule of thumb is this: If you have serious questions about your health, or if you are under a physician's care, you should consult your doctor before you abstain from food or change your diet.

HOW TO FAST

"In Scripture the normal means of fasting involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water," says Richard Foster in his book *Celebration of Discipline*. "From a physical point, this is usually what is involved in a fast."

The *partial* fast is described in the book of Daniel. Although the water fast seemed to be the custom of the prophet, there was a three-week period in which he abstained only from delicacies: meat and wine (Dan. 10:3).

Richard Foster describes two other biblical fasts, the *absolute* and the *supernatural absolute*. These are total fasts, meaning no food--solid or liquid--and no water.

Paul went on an absolute fast for three days following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). Esther called for a an absolute fast for three days when the Jews faced annihilation in the Persian Empire (Esther 4:16).

Moses and Elijah engaged in what must be considered supernatural absolute fasts of forty days (Deut. 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8).

But because of dehydration, I do not recommend the absolute or supernatural fasts. They can be dangerous to your health. I strongly advise you to drink plenty of liquids, including pure water (preferably distilled) and vegetable and fruit juices. Obviously, if God leads you to undertake an absolute or supernatural absolute fast, you must obey. However, I strongly encourage you to be certain, without doubt, that God is leading you.

HOW TO BEGIN AND CONDUCT YOUR FAST

How you begin and conduct your fast will largely determine your success. Permit me to suggest steps to take that will help make your time with the Lord more meaningful and spiritually rewarding, while at the same time enhancing your physical health.

Set an Objective

The first step is to set a specific objective. Why are you fasting? Is it for spiritual renewal, for guidance, for healing, for the resolution of problems, for special grace

to handle a difficult situation? Keeping your goal in focus will help you sustain your fast when physical desires and life's pressures tempt you to abandon it.

I personally believe the Holy Spirit has given all believers an urgent call to humble ourselves through fasting and prayer so that He may stir our souls, awaken our churches, and heal our land according to 2 Chronicles 7:14. I urge you to make personal, local, national, and world revival and the fulfilment of the Great Commission your primary purpose for fasting.

Lay a Spiritual Foundation

The second step is to prepare yourself spiritually. The very foundation of fasting and prayer is repentance. Unconfessed sin will hinder your prayers. In Scripture, God always requires His people to repent of their sins before He will hear their prayers.

As you begin your fast, I encourage you to confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance. Include the obvious sins and those not so apparent, such as leaving your first love for the Lord, worldly-mindedness, self-centeredness, and spiritual indifference--being unwilling to share your faith in Christ with others, unwilling to help at church, unwilling to spend time in God's Word and prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal anything in your heart that is not pleasing to God and claim the promise of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (NKJV).

Make Physical Preparations

The third step is to prepare yourself physically. Do not rush into a fast. If you plan to go without food for several days, you find it helpful to begin by eating smaller meals before you abstain altogether. This sends your mind a signal that you have entered the time of the fast, and it helps to "shrink" your stomach and appetite.

Some health professionals suggest eating only raw foods for two days before starting a fast.

Preparing yourself physically makes a drastic change in your eating routine a little easier. Then you can turn your full attention to the Lord in prayer.

Ask God for Guidance

The fourth step is to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the kind of fast God wants you to undertake. Does He want you to go completely without food, consuming only water? Or only water and juices? Is He asking you to fast one meal a day, one day a week, or several days or weeks at a time? Is God leading you to undertake a forty-day fast? Inviting the Holy Spirit's guidance in this matter will make your time with God more meaningful.

Token fasting, such as giving up chocolates or lemon pie or some other favorite food, may be commendable, but it does not allow the Holy Spirit to do the inner

work necessary to bring about real changes in your spiritual life. Nor does it persuade God that you are serious about revival for America and the world and the fulfilment of the Great Commission.

As I pointed out earlier, the biblical fast usually calls for water. I have conducted many strictly water fasts for a day or several days at a time with special blessings. However I strongly suggest adding vegetable and fruit juices to your intake, although some advice against orange or tomato juice because of acid content.

Once you know how to fast, short fasts of one to three days require no more than water. Christians who fast regularly often go ten days or longer on water--even up to forty days--with beneficial effects, both spiritually and physically, under the daily supervision of one who is knowledgeable about water fasting. You have more food reserves stored in body fat than you realize, and most of us would be more than happy to give up the fat.

However, until you build up your "fasting muscles," or if your are undertaking a long fast, you may want to add vegetable or fruit juices (preferably without sugar or sweeteners) to your intake.

Limit Activity

The fifth step is to limit your activity level. Exercise moderately. Rest as much as your schedule will permit. Short naps are very helpful. "Resting is not a sin," Dr. Ruidbal explains. "Fasting in the strictest sense is physiological rest. Your body rests from the processes involved in digestion and the assimilation of food to concentrate on excretion."

That is why during the fast you may experience side effects. "Some people experience headaches, stomach aches, nausea, foul tastes in their mouth, or a pasty tongue," Dr. Ruibal says. "Their urine may become darker, and even their perspiration may smell worse than usual. Vomiting may occur. This is not normal but should not be cause for alarm. In a prolonged fast, it is not unusual to experience slight fever. Basically, the body is taking advantage of the fast to clean and heal itself."

Consider Your Medications

The sixth step is to consider your medications. It is particularly important that you consult with your doctor before going on a fast if you are on any prescribed medication.

Plan Your Prayer Time

The seventh step is to set aside ample time to be alone with the Lord during your fast. The more time you spend with Him in fellowship, worship, and adoration and the more you read and meditate on His Word during your fast, the greater your effectiveness will be in prayer and the more meaningful your fast will be.

Seek God in prayer and as you meditate on His Word each morning before you

leave home or go about your daily routine. Return to prayer at lunch, and come before Him again in the evening for unhurried times seeking His face. Of course, you should practice His presence and continue to have fellowship with Him constantly as your pray without ceasing throughout the day.

There is not set formula for how to pray when you fast. You may wish to pray aloud or silently, asking the Lord to grant specific requests. I suggest you make a list and add to it daily as needs come to mind. Pray earnestly for your family, your pastor, your church, your community, and our nation. Pray for revival in our land and a great worldwide spiritual harvest. Pray for the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

You may wait before God in quiet meditation as you invite the Holy Spirit to minister to you and bring to mind those things He wants you to pray about.

You should go about your daily activities mindful that your are still fasting and seeking the Lord. Some of my deepest spiritual insights have come as I continue my ministry responsibilities while seeking His face and practicing His presence.

If you do not know what to pray for, or you feel "prayed out," wait quietly before Him. Turn to the psalms or other favourite passages of Scripture and pray the Word of God back to Him. For example, pray each verse of Psalm 23 aloud, thanking Him for performing each of those promises in your life. Worship and praise the Lord. Tell God how much you love Him and want to serve Him. Invite His presence into your life in a fresh way.

You may wish to approach God with the Lord's Prayer recorded in Matthew 6:9-13. Generally, this prayer covers everything we could possibly ask or say to God. As an introduction to this prayer, Jesus reminded His disciples that "your Father knows the things that you need of before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8 NKJV).

Now that you have an idea of how to go about fasting, it is time to fix your gaze upon the One who sees you and knows you--the One who delights in you and is waiting for you to come before Him.

HOW TO BREAK YOUR FAST

When your designated time of fasting is finished, you will begin to eat again. But how you break your fast is extremely important--both for your physical and spiritual well-being.

If you end your fast gradually, as you should, the beneficial physical and spiritual effects will linger for days. But if you rush into eating solid foods--the prospect of food can tempt you to do that--you may experience diarrhoea, sickness, fainting, and even death due to shock. This is especially true of an extended fast.

Nutritionist Paul Bragg explains in *The Miracle of Fasting* :

When you have been on a ...fast, your stomach and the thirty feet of intestinal tract have contracted, and when you are ready to break a fast, it should be done (with special care).

Suddenly reintroducing solid food to your stomach and digestive tract always creates defeating effects. You can lose much of your deep sense of peace and well-being in the space of a single meal. Even a three-day fast requires reasonable precautions. It is wise to start with a little soup--something thin and nourishing, such as vegetable broth made from onion, celery, potatoes, and carrots--and fresh fruits such as watermelon and cantaloupe.

As your body accepts these foods, advance to a few tablespoons of solid food such as raw fruits and vegetables or a raw salad and baked potato. (I do not recommend milk or milk products and meat because some individuals may suffer adverse reactions to these after a fast.) Then, several hours later, try another small snack. The idea is to ease back into regular eating with several small snacks during the first few days. This requires discipline, but you will avoid the severe pain and other serious physical reactions that come from eating too much too soon.

I terminated my forty-day with a cup of soup, followed by small amounts of watermelon and other fruits every few hours for a couple of days until I was comfortable to resume my normal routine of eating. As you can imagine, that cup of soup and first few bites of solid food were ecstasy. Never had ordinary food tasted so good.

EXPECT RESULTS!

No two persons will experience the same effects of a fast because no two persons go into it in exactly the same condition or with the same needs. But if you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord in repentance, intercession, and worship and consistently meditate on His Word, you will experience a heightened awareness of His presence. Your confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. And you will feel mentally, spiritually, and physically refreshed...

Most people experience a measure of revival as a result of fasting. In addition, you will begin to see God's hand move in the situation that originally drove you to your knees and to fasting, including spiritual awakening and revival for your pastor, your church, and your church leaders.

I encourage you to join me in fasting and praying again and again until we truly experience God's best in our lives, our homes, our churches, our beloved nation, and our world.