

Renewing Life

Breakthrough Praying:

Isaiah 58:1-14
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A woman, pregnant with twins, went into labor. Her husband sped them to the hospital and got into an accident. The husband woke up with his practical joking cousin sitting at the foot of his hospital bed. “Your wife is fine,” he said. “She gave birth to a healthy boy and girl. There is one concern.” The husband’s eyebrows lifted. “What’s that?” he asked. “Since you both were out so long and they needed names on the birth certificates, I named your children,” the cousin explained. The husband took a deep breath and then spoke, “What did you name them?” The cousin answered, “I named the little girl Denise.” Sighing, the new father commented, “That’s a pretty name. How about my son?” The cousin continued, “Oh, he’s Denephew.” Of course, that cousin was leading the father on. Jesus, however, was not leading you and me on when he taught:

Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks. (Matthew 7:7-8, NLT)

Jesus expected our prayers to be answered. He called for persistent prayer. A critical part of whole-hearted, persistent, breakthrough praying is fasting. Jesus showed its necessity when his disciples did not meet the challenge of healing a boy. He told them their faith was insufficient and that prayer and fasting was necessary (Matthew 17:21). Jesus’ own experience

demonstrates the importance of fasting. Although he was anointed with the Spirit, Jesus walked in the power of the Spirit and made a difference only after fasting for 40 days (Luke 4:14).

I first began to see this truth when Dr. C. Peter Wagner shared his study of an Argentine pastor named Omar Cabrerra. This pastor would enter a town, fast and pray until God showed him that the town was ready to receive the gospel. He would then contact officials about holding evangelistic services and they would cooperate. They'd give him free advertising, offer an appropriate place, sometimes rent-free, and then crowds would come in response to invitations and advertisements. At the services, before he'd preach, he prayed. The Holy Spirit would come on people, and they'd be broken with conviction of sin. Some would spontaneously be healed. He didn't even have to pray for them. Following the campaign, a new congregation would form as a team from his local church organized the converts. In that way over 150,000 people worshiped every weekend as part of his church in many locations. Pastor Omar isn't merely anointed with God's Spirit. Through fasting and prayer he walks in the power of the Spirit.

Last week, we examined a 21-day fast by Daniel. We found that persistent fasting, prayer and repentance overcame the authority Satan had to block God's answers to his prayers. Daniel's experience reveals that our prayers can be heard in heaven, that they can be according to God's will and still not be answered until we humble ourselves in fasting. Grace comes to the humble. Mercy is given to the repentant. In fasting we humble ourselves and repent.

However, there are people who fast and gain no benefit. In the New Testament a Pharisee fasted twice a week and still experienced God's anger (Luke 18:12). In church history some people thought the more they fasted and afflicted themselves the more God would be pleased and give them what they want. They plunged themselves into severe disciplines of fasting and self-inflicted pain. We call that asceticism. John Wesley wrote:

Of all the means of grace there is scarce any concerning which men have run into greater extremes, than... religious fasting. How have some exalted this beyond all Scripture and reason; — and others utterly disregarded it. (Wesley's Works Vol. V, Sermon 27)

I confess that I was at one extreme. For a long time I disregarded fasting. I would read of the Pharisee's vain fasting and then misinterpret the 58th chapter of Isaiah. I thought it minimized the importance of fasting. Listen Isaiah.

Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Tell my people Israel of their sins! Yet they act so pious! They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to hear my laws. You would almost think this was a righteous nation that would never abandon its God. They love to make a show of coming to me and asking me to take action on their behalf. "We have fasted before you!" they say. "Why aren't you impressed? We have done much penance, and you don't even notice it!" (Isaiah 58:1-3, NLT)

Can we be deluded by our religious devotion, by our acts of piety? Can we think God owes us something because we are fulfilling some kind of formula that brings automatic results? The Israelites thought that way. They prayed and fasted and wondered why their prayers weren't answered. Here was God's answer.

I will tell you why! It's because you are living for yourselves even while you are fasting. You keep right on oppressing your workers. What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like a blade of grass in the wind. You dress in sackcloth and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the LORD? (Isaiah 58:3-5, NLT)

For the Israelites fasting was a formula they used on God while they went on with their normal lives. As they continued exploiting workers, quarreling and fighting to gain advantage, they employed fasting to gain God's favor. However, fasting is not a formula to work God over. It is not something artificial. When you are hit with the flu, fasting is natural. Your digestive system needs a rest while your body focuses on the inflammation. When you hear tragic news, fasting is natural. As you regain your senses, you focus on relationships and other things. The

last thing you think about or want is food. In the same way fasting is natural in your relationship with God when you realize that something is not right, something is needful; and your attention to that thing is more important than your food. In that context fasting is relational, not religious. In that context fasting is fellowship, not formula; it is natural, not artificial. Indeed, it is repentance and hunger for God's wisdom, mercy and favor.

Truly something is wrong. Our world lives under the darkening shadow of death. We, the church of Jesus Christ serve while being attacked by Satan and crippled by our sins. Fasting is natural for our situation. That is why Jesus began his teaching on fasting in the Sermon on the Mount with these words, "When you fast" (Matthew 6:16). He didn't say, "If you fast." He said, "When you fast!" He expected us to fast. If you are not fasting periodically, you are out of touch with reality as Jesus sees it.

I didn't realize that. For years I misread Isaiah 58:6-7:

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 him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7, NIV)

I thought that instead of fasting we should deal with injustice and care for the poor. I did not realize that God was outlining purposes for fasting. We live where hurt and injustice multiply in relationships and our social order. We fast to see God expose and free us of these sins. We fast to see addictions broken and people freed. We fast on behalf of the poor and also to share our food, drink clothing with them. We fast to see our own families healed. If we fast for those purposes, how can we neglect the perspective and behavior that fulfill them? Listen.

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. (Isaiah 58:9-10, NIV)

The Holy Spirit is not saying do these things instead of fasting. God is saying, “I want you to fast and work for my hurting, suffering family. Then I’ll give you understanding, and you’ll see plainly the path I’ve marked out for you.” Indeed, God won’t only give us understanding; listen to the promises:

If you do these things, your salvation will come like the dawn. Yes, your healing will come quickly. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind. Then when you call, the LORD will answer. “Yes, I am here,” he will quickly reply. (Isaiah 58:8-9, NLT)

Deliverance will advance on the landscape of our lives, healing will be released, guidance will become obvious, protection will be provided, and the presence of God will be revealed. There is more.

The LORD will guide you continually, watering your life when you are dry and keeping you healthy, too. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. Your children will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as the people who rebuild their walls and cities. (Isaiah 58:11-12, NLT)

God saw all that was lost in Israel and promised the renewal of life, but that promise wasn’t merely for a nation. The same God cares for us as a congregation and for you as his child. What has been lost? What dreams have been crushed? Were they unholy dreams that needed to be crushed? Were they good dreams that are lost forever? The impossible is possible with God. You may think what was lost is unrecoverable, but you don’t know what God can do. He can bring joy and triumph to the most afflicted soul and excitement and healing to the most unlikely relationship, so that what was lost isn’t worth comparing to what has been gained.

If things aren’t right, then fasting is a very natural response. Will you converse and fellowship with God over what needs changing? Will you seek his vision and path? Will you fast and pray?