

The Discipline of Fasting



Pages From My Life's Book (Part 8)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again. The title of my talks this week is "Discipled in the Desert."

Shortly after I had come to know the Lord in a personal way, in World War II, I spent three years serving as a hospital attendant with the British Forces in the deserts of North Africa. God used this period of my life to teach me, from the Bible and from personal experience, many of the basic lessons of the Christian life. Yesterday I shared with you how the Lord showed me, in a very vivid way, two aspects of my identification with Christ: that I had been crucified with Christ; and also that I had been buried with Him.

Today I am going to share with you two further practical lessons that God taught me during this period. The first lesson relates to fasting. Before I say anything about this perhaps I should give a brief definition of what I mean by fasting. By fasting I understand abstaining from food, deliberately, by choice, for spiritual purposes. I say "abstaining from food" because in most cases in the Bible where people fasted, they abstained from food but not from water. Sometimes they also abstained from water but that was something of an exception. So I'm talking now about fasting as abstaining from food by deliberate choice, even when food is available, for spiritual purposes.

One of the things that the Holy Spirit showed me immediately, I think maybe only four weeks after I had come to know the Lord in a personal way, the Holy Spirit showed me that fasting is a normal part of Christian life and discipline. It is not something strange or "way out" that a few fanatics sometimes practice. It is a normal part of Christian life and discipline. As a matter of fact, later on when I was able to attend churches and hear preachers, I was astonished that so many Christians seemed to know nothing whatever of what the Bible had to say about fasting, and yet the Bible is full of fasting, not least the New Testament.

For instance, Jesus Himself fasted and He assumed that His disciples would fast. In the Sermon on the Mount when He was laying down the principles of the Christian life in chapter 6, He said to them "When you fast." He didn't say, "If you fast," He said, "When you fast." In other words, He assumed that they would be fasting and He gave them the principles

to follow. In chapter 6 He says "when" about three things: When you give alms, when you pray, and when you fast. Really, He assumed that all His disciples would do all three of those things: give alms, pray, and fast.

If we look on in the New Testament, we find that the early church fasted and that its leaders fasted. Paul said of himself that he was "often in fastings." It was a thing that he practiced frequently.

If you look in the Old Testament, you will find that many of God's most faithful servants fasted. To name just a few: Moses, David and some of the other kings, Elijah, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. And you find that in some cases the fasting of God's people brought down divine intervention and changed the course of history.

At any rate, without my knowing all these facts from the Bible, the Holy Spirit just showed me that God wanted me to fast. And so in the desert for two or three years I normally fasted each Wednesday. I went without food all Wednesday. The reaction of my fellow soldiers was somewhat amusing. Those of you who know anything about the religion of Islam will know that the Moslems have one month in the year, Ramadan, where they don't eat in the daytime. They eat plenty at night but nothing in the daytime. It is a month of fasting. Well, because we were in a Moslem country in Egypt, the British soldiers had learned a little about Ramadan. So the soldiers in my particular company used call Wednesday Ramadan because that was the day I fasted. Of course, I didn't make a show of fasting, but when you are living in close quarters with men every hour of the day and night, if you don't eat your meals they certainly notice it.

The attitude of my fellow soldiers was rather remarkable. After they saw that my faith was genuine and that I was really leading a life that corresponded to what I believed although they didn't want to join me in my faith, they respected me. And in a strange way they were glad to have me because in moments of danger they considered me to be a kind of insurance policy with them. More than once when we were in a real difficult situation and once when our little medical unit was cut off behind the enemy lines and we didn't know where we were going to end up, I remember one of those tough, blaspheming British soldiers came to me and he said, "Corporal Prince, I'm glad you're with us." So, although they did not follow my example, they respected my life and in many ways I think I was a kind of help and protection to those soldiers.

For two years in active service we hardly lost one man out of that company and that was a very unusual record in those circumstances. Interestingly enough, later when I read the journal of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, I discovered that John Wesley practiced fasting regularly and that he would not ordain a man to the Methodist ministry who would not promise to fast each Wednesday and Friday until 4 P.M. So I learned that God had shown this lesson to others, but He showed it to me, individually and personally.

I would like to just briefly mention three results in my life from fasting, three things that I experienced. First, I experienced a sense of the nearness of God. As I separated myself from material things, spiritual things became more real. Secondly, I got special insight into Scripture in periods of fasting. Thirdly, I obtained specific answers to prayer through fasting.

I want to give you one specific example of how God answered prayer for me when I fasted. One of the things about desert conditions which is very obvious in the history of the children of Israel, is that the desert tends to provoke murmuring or complaining. This happened with Israel many times and it also brought God's judgment and disfavor upon them and they had to repent. Well, I have to say that I went through some of the same experiences. I began to complain many times. I got so weary of the desert and the food and the blaspheming British soldiers and I said, "Lord, why do you keep me here? Why can't you give me some other place to be?" And when I did this, I lost my sense of God's presence and blessing. I knew still somewhere that God was caring for me, that God was real, but my close and intimate, personal relationship with God that had become so precious to me somehow seemed to have disappeared.

So one day I decided to set aside a special day, not a Wednesday, but some other day to fast and to ask God the reason why His presence seemed to have been withdrawn from me. So I spent the whole day fasting. It was a day when we were not moving around. We were near some base depot. And I said, "God, why aren't you near to me? Why do I have to continue in this monotonous wearisome life in this desert?" And by the evening, God gave me an answer. He spoke to me very clearly in words that I can record for you and He said this: "Why have you not thanked Me? Why have you not praised Me?" And as I meditated on what God said, I began to see that I had become unthankful, that I had stopped thanking God and praising Him, and that was why I had lost the sense of God's presence.

And so in that way I learned the importance of continual thanksgiving and praise in the Christian life. And in due course, the Holy Spirit directed me to various Scriptures along this line. I would like to share with you just two of those Scriptures. The first is in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–19. Paul says three or four very simple things:

> "Rejoice always [even in the desert]; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; [and 'everything' includes being there in the desert with the flies and the sand and the bad food and the blaspheming soldiers] in everything give thanks for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit..." (NAS)

The implication is that if we don't always rejoice, if we don't pray without ceasing and if we don't give thanks in everything, we are quenching the Holy Spirit! And that's what I had done by murmuring and complaining. Instead of praising and giving thanks, I had quenched the Holy Spirit in my life.

And then there is a passage in Hebrews 13:15:

> "Through Him then, [that's Jesus] let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." (NAS)

And there again I saw that as Christians God expects us to continually offer up a sacrifice of praise and that it comes from our lips, not just inwardly from our hearts, but from our lips, that we have to make our praise vocal and it's by giving thanks to the Name of the Lord!

And I saw that praise is a sacrifice. This was a real lesson for me, that sacrifice costs something, that I had to praise God the most when I felt like praising Him the least, and that that was when my praise was most acceptable to God. So I adjusted my life and I learned the discipline of giving thanks and praising God in every situation and circumstance, and you know what I discovered? My circumstances didn't change, but I did! And when I changed, then my view of my circumstances become different, too.

Our time is up for today. I'll be back with you again tomorrow at this time. Tomorrow I'll share how I lay sick in the hospital for one year, and the lessons that God taught me about faith and healing.

Radio Program

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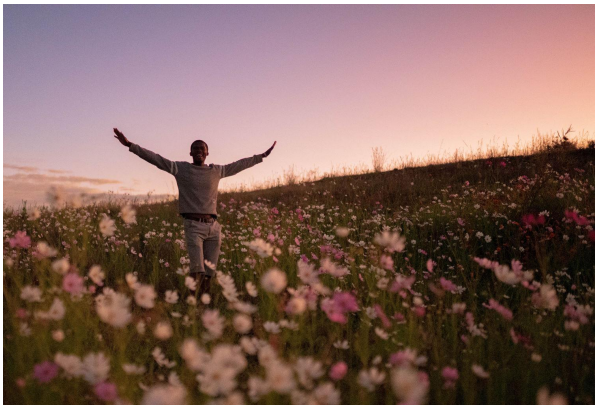

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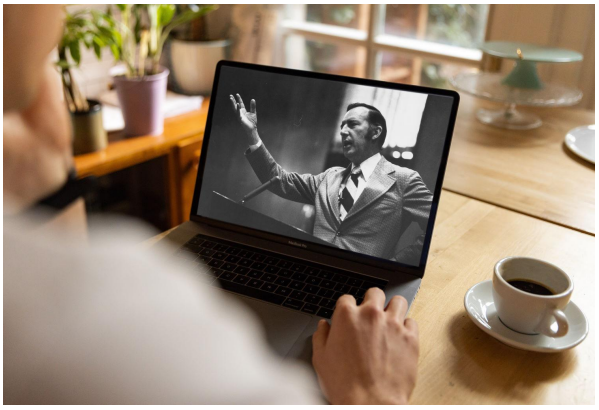

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