

## Forgotten Weapon

Since the "official start" of the war in Iraq on March 19, Americans have been given a steady diet of detailed reports about the vast array of high-tech weapons and innovative techniques being used by the military to dislodge Saddam Hussein's regime from power. News reports have also made much of the internet-based methods being employed by antiwar protest organizers to quickly gather large crowds for demonstrations.

Although both groups claim to be fighting evil with their state-of-the-art electronic methods, they seem to have overlooked an ancient technique that for centuries has produced dramatic results against entrenched evil -- a call to combine prayer with fasting. When the disciples of Jesus were unable to exorcise a particularly aggressive evil spirit from a young boy (Mark 9:17ff), Jesus cast it out of the boy and restored his health. The disciples asked Jesus why they had not been able to accomplish the healing, and some early biblical translations report that Jesus replied, "this kind can come out only by prayer and fasting."

Whether or not Jesus actually included fasting in that statement, he knew from personal experience that combining the two spiritual disciplines was exceptionally powerful in confronting the forces of evil. Immediately after his baptism and prior to the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in fasting and prayer in the wilderness. He confronted the most powerful basic temptations humans ever face and emerged victoriously enabled to announce and reveal the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' employment of fasting and prayer to confront evil was in keeping with the Jews' long history of similar discipline in times of personal and national crisis. King Jehoshaphat called for a nationwide fast when a vast army of enemies laid siege to Judah. The prophet Joel called Israel to fasting in repentance for their unfaithfulness that had brought calamity upon the nation. When the Hebrews in exile were threatened with extermination by jealous Persian officials, Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai called for a citywide fast by the Jews while she sought an opportunity to ask the king to intervene. Daniel, another famous exiled Jew in Babylon, refrained from consuming "choice foods" for three weeks while he mourned and sought to understand a vision he received from God regarding wars in Mesopotamia and the future of his people. Ezra the priest called for prayer and fasting in preparation for the difficult, dangerous journey by a group of Jewish returnees from Babylon to Jerusalem through hostile territory. The first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas for planting churches in Asia and Europe arose out of a group of Jewish Christian leaders in Antioch who gathered to fast and pray.

Fasting combined with prayer is a particularly effective tool because it integrates body and spirit in the quest for faithfulness to God. One important aspect of fasting is its expression of sorrow over the effects of sin upon people. Those who have lost loved ones know that deep grief often steals appetite. In the current situation of war in Iraq, fasting can be a powerful expression of mourning over the suffering and deaths occurring each day on all sides of the conflict. Fasting communicates sorrow over the long oppression of the Iraqi people by cruel leaders, and over the heart-rending sacrifices made by soldiers separated from loved ones and civilian careers. Hunger-numbing sorrow is an appropriate response to the destruction of the beautiful, historic biblical land of Mesopotamia. The damage done to international friendships and the division of nations and societies into pro-war and antiwar factions by this conflict should be lamented. Equally grievous is the long-term economic harm of this war to the global economy through destruction, instability, and the diversion of funds from constructive uses.

According to news reports, the US and British militaries launched cruise missiles worth over \$1 billion on March 21 alone.

Most sorrowful of all, the US military has subtly chosen to assign quasi-religious names to its weapons and techniques, ascribing awe to bombs guided by global positioning satellites when Christians believe that response should be reserved for God alone, who guides them by the Holy Spirit. Fasting expresses grief that people are being seduced into trusting "horses and chariots" and the "size of the king's army" rather than hoping in the love and care of God (Psalm 20:7; 33:16).

A second role of fasting with prayer is the expression of supplication, seeking and hoping for God's intended outcomes. The pangs of hunger which accompany fasting remind us that Jesus proclaimed the blessedness of hungering and thirsting for righteousness. By choosing to accept the discomfort of hunger, we express our willingness to suffer and sacrifice in order that God's purposes can be realized. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster states that "more than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us." Our fasting does not change God's intentions; it changes our perspective on the things we serve, clutch, and hope for.

Prayerful fasting is also a means of expressing solidarity with those who suffer. The pangs of voluntary physical hunger teach us compassion, literally "feeling with" those who suffer by coercion or necessity. Temporary hunger reminds us to intercede for those whose pain cannot be ended by a simple choice to break a fast.

Finally, fasting with prayer welcomes new sharpness of focus in listening to God. Physiologically, digestion diverts blood supply away from the brain to the stomach. Those who regularly practice prayerful fasting agree that temporary physical hunger sharpens the mind's concentration on issues of importance and heightens the spirit's sensitivity to God's leading. It enables the spiritual humility that might help Christians find their way through the current wilderness of ambivalence over war in Iraq, similar to Joshua's preparation for the battle of Jericho (Joshua 5:13ff). In a pre-conquest vision, he encountered an angel of Lord and inquired whether God was on the side of Israel or the residents of Jericho. "Neither," the angel replied. "I command the army of the Lord. Take off your sandals, for you stand on holy ground."

The American Religious Identification Survey of 2001 showed that 159 million Americans identify themselves as Christians. Let's reduce that by 59 million, assuming that many are only nominally Christian. Reduce it again by 25 million to eliminate young children and those in ill health. Suppose that the 75 million American Christians who remain would heed a call to fast and pray for just one meal, spending the thirty minutes they would normally use eating to instead pray with sorrow, supplication, solidarity, and sharpness over the current crisis in Iraq. That would result in 37.5 million person-hours of intercession for God's help to humankind.

Imagine further that those 75 million American Christians would each set aside \$2 representing the food they would have eaten in the meal they skipped while praying (a conservative number, especially if it was a restaurant meal). If they all sent their \$2 to one relief agency, that agency would suddenly have an additional \$150 million with which to make God's Kingdom visible by alleviating the suffering caused by war, poverty, disease, and natural disaster.

If only half of the self-proclaimed Christians in the USA fasted with prayer for thirty minutes once each month, then in a year's time they would account for 450 million person-hours of prayer for God's help to those who suffer. And if they donated \$2 to that one relief agency for their skipped meal each month for a year, the Christians of America would be able to spend an additional \$1.8 billion annually above current benevolent expenditures to feed the hungry, heal the sick, house the homeless, clothe the naked, and make God's love known to the world.

The key is the combination of fasting and prayer. Fasting without prayer becomes a mere social statement, or just a diet. Prayer without fasting is certainly commendable and essential, but it lacks the element of voluntary suffering and physical empathy brought by foregoing food for a time. The money that could be gathered in such a campaign is substantial, but the greatest value of the effort would be in the transformation of the souls of those who fasted and prayed.

Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline* that "fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that will never happen in any other way. It is a means of God's grace that should not be neglected." One can only wonder how much deeper the world's pain must get before the Church finally rolls out this seemingly forgotten but potent weapon for the battle against the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms.

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March 2003