

Hunger FOR Jesus!

**Why fasting works for
21st-century believers**

By John W. Kennedy

Chan Keith's oncologist delivered a grim diagnosis: Keith had abnormal multiple myeloma, an incurable bone disease. At the most, the doctor declared, Keith had three years to live.

But Keith knew God had power to restore his physical well-being. During an earlier fast he had been healed of the migraine headaches that plagued him for 20 years.

So Keith enlisted the help of members of Lakeview Assembly of God in Stockton, Calif., where he served as pastor. For the following seven weeks, 350 people agreed to fast at least one day a week.

By the end of 40 days, God not only had healed Keith, but another four terminal cancer patients who attended the church as well.

The miracle took place in 1991. Keith, who now pastors Westside Assembly of God in Lodi, has spent much of the past 15 years traveling to churches around the country teaching about the power of fasting and prayer.

Fasting misunderstood

Search Christian bookstores today and there are plenty of titles telling shoppers how to lose weight, how to find prosperity or how to gain meaning in life. But if a shop even has any books on fasting, the few volumes likely are tucked away on the bottom shelf.

Many Christians today tend to scoff at fasting, believing it is some ancient ritual that no longer deserves consideration. The notion seems antiquated, a medieval relic geared toward monastic aesthetics.

Several years ago I worked for a Christian organization where the leader suggested the staff fast one meal a week in order to seek God's direction for the institution. Immediately, one employee laughed nervously, declaring that surely nobody with today's busy schedules could abide by such restrictions. Another co-worker agreed to participate at a specified lunchtime. On his designated day, I saw him raiding the office candy jar, both at morning break and just after the noon hour.



Marc McBride

"I thought you were fasting today," I said.

"Yeah, I skipped lunch," he said, oblivious to the purpose of the practice.

Why has a discipline that once prompted revivals and served as a hallmark for the Church fallen into disuse?

Are we convinced in this culture — where we're accustomed to denying ourselves nothing — that somehow the biblical model of fasting is irrelevant?

Powerful benefits

Fasting isn't a formula for success. When we give up food for a while that isn't a guarantee that we'll be healed, become unstoppable soul-winners or be delivered from debt.

Yet fasting can transform the participant's life. Rather than always telling God what we need, those on

a fast are more open to hearing what the Lord wants to say.

Assemblies of God General Superintendent Thomas E. Trask began setting aside Tuesday as a regular fasting day when he entered the ministry. He's continued the discipline in his 12-plus years leading the Fellowship.

"Fasting is saying to God, 'I'm serious about this matter about which I'm petitioning You,'" Trask says. "Fasting prepares one to hear the voice of the Spirit. Some victories are accomplished only through fasting and prayer."

No one has written more about fasting in recent years than Elmer Towns, whose four books include *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough* and *Fasting Can Change Your Life*.

"Fasting is eliminating or changing your diet for a spiritual purpose, primarily to seek God," Towns says.

Citing Isaiah 58 as a key text, Towns contends there are nine types of fasts outlined in Scripture.

Even so, there is no set biblical formula for fasts, which range from one day to 40 days.

Some Christians argue fasting includes abstaining from certain entertainment habits to which one is accustomed. Keith doesn't think so.

"As far as Scripture is concerned, fasting only deals with completely setting aside one's appetite for food," Keith says. "We're not talking about turning off the TV set for an hour. Fasting has to do with quieting your humanity so that you can be more aware of the still, small voice of God."

Fasting isn't dieting

The decision to fast should be based on spiritual reasons — cleansing the soul — rather than on any incidental

health benefits, according to Dr. Ingrid Kohlstadt, a physician and nutrition specialist in Annapolis, Md.

"People who are overweight sometimes think they can become fit by fasting," Kohlstadt says. "This is incorrect medicine. You don't fast to become fit. You have to be fit in order to fast."

In this age of multiple fad diets, even many Christians have come to view fasting as just an option to lose weight rapidly.

Twenty years ago the minister of the church I attended urged the congregation to fast in preparation for weeklong revival services. An outspoken woman in the church, an elder's wife, responded, "Get real! I can't even stay on Weight Watchers."

Occasionally we hear someone exclaim, "I'm starving!" Of course when people make such a statement their body really isn't in danger of

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— Thomas E. Trask

shutting down from a lack of nutrients; what they really mean is that their belly has gone a few hours without being pampered.

In an effort to make fasting more palatable, some church leaders today advocate a "Daniel fast," based on Daniel 10:3.

"That's really a vegetarian diet — no meat, delicious food or wine," Keith says. "Some Christians like it because it makes it easier on us."

Dying to self

Although fasting isn't specifically commanded in Scripture, advocates note that Jesus taught in Matthew 6:16 *when* you fast, not *if* you fast.

Self-denial is not a common creed in the United States, where we are accustomed to fulfilling every whim instantly, whether it's charging material goods with credit cards or eating rich foods until we're stuffed.

One reason many American

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Christians are quick to relegate fasting to the past is that food has become an idol in some circles. Overeating is one addiction many Christians seem to tolerate.

Fasting costs something — primarily sensory pleasure. And that's something Christians don't want to forfeit.

"We'd rather donate a check than give up something that is special to our hearts," says Clarence St. John, Minnesota District superintendent for the Assemblies of God. He has fasted four consecutive meals each week since college.

Trask agrees that fasting is a neglected discipline. "We don't want to deal with anything that runs contrary to the flesh," Trask says. "In America, we are people given to appetite. To deny self is not popular, yet it is essential as a believer in Christ."

Fasting really isn't about food, according to Keith. "It's about getting to a place of quiet in the presence of God," he says. "Our appetite is what we sacrifice on the altar."

Reasons for fasting

The Bible is full of people who fasted, including Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel and Paul. In the Old Testament, fasting frequently is connected with mourning over sin and demonstrating humility in the wake of God's judgment. In the New Testament, it's mentioned as a prelude to commissioning missionaries (Acts 13:3).

St. John says fasting energizes him. "When the Lord hears my cry, He cares," St. John says. "We can't earn anything by fasting, but it does build faith."

Fasting breaks bondages and tears down strongholds that prayer alone can't, according to St. John.

A public fast is one in which a leader proclaims an emergency, as Ezra or Jehoshaphat did.

However, in the modern U.S. church, a fast is more likely to involve a pastor and a church board or staff fasting together regarding a strategic situation facing the congregation. Sometimes church members are called to fast when there is a special decision, such as

"Fasting is about getting to a place of quiet in the presence of God. Our appetite is what we sacrifice on the altar."

— Chan Keith

the option to acquire property.

But most fasts are done by individuals for private reasons. "A fast is between a person and the Lord," Trask says. "Fasting, when coupled with prayer, brings one into a closer relationship to the Lord so that obstructions and distractions are minimal."

As Keith well knows, in Matthew 17:21 Jesus explains that certain healings can be accomplished only by a prayer and fasting combination.

"When something needs to be accomplished and it doesn't happen right away, fasting should be added

continued on page 20

Expect opposition

Those who embark on a fast should expect spiritual opposition. Satan will make you think you are starving, will try to convince you to cut your goal short, and will interrupt your schedule.

Fasting is a practice in self-denial because we give up something that is both pleasurable and, in the long run, necessary.

There shouldn't be any pigging out before the big event. Cut back on caffeine a few days before a fast. Those trying to fast for the first time should initially do a partial fast.

As a body cleanses itself of chemicals during the first few days of a fast, headaches, a craving for food, faintness and sleeplessness are common.

Invariably, as soon as you begin to fast, a friend will invite you to lunch. That popcorn a co-worker is heating up in the nearby microwave suddenly smells delicious.

As the days go on, misinformed friends and relatives may become the leading naysayers. A mother worried about weight loss might implore you to get some nourishment to "keep up your strength." Co-workers who figure out you aren't eating might warn that your work will suffer if you keep skipping meals.

In reality, during the first 25 days of a fast a person sheds surplus fat, according to Elmer Towns. After that, muscle tone can be endangered.

Rigorous exercise isn't a good idea during a fast, but moderate walking as exercise is recommended. A fasting person must drink water frequently.

A side benefit is better health thanks to the body's tendency to cleanse toxins from the system. "If done properly, fasting can actually improve a body's ability to use food as energy," says Dr. Ingrid Kohlstadt.

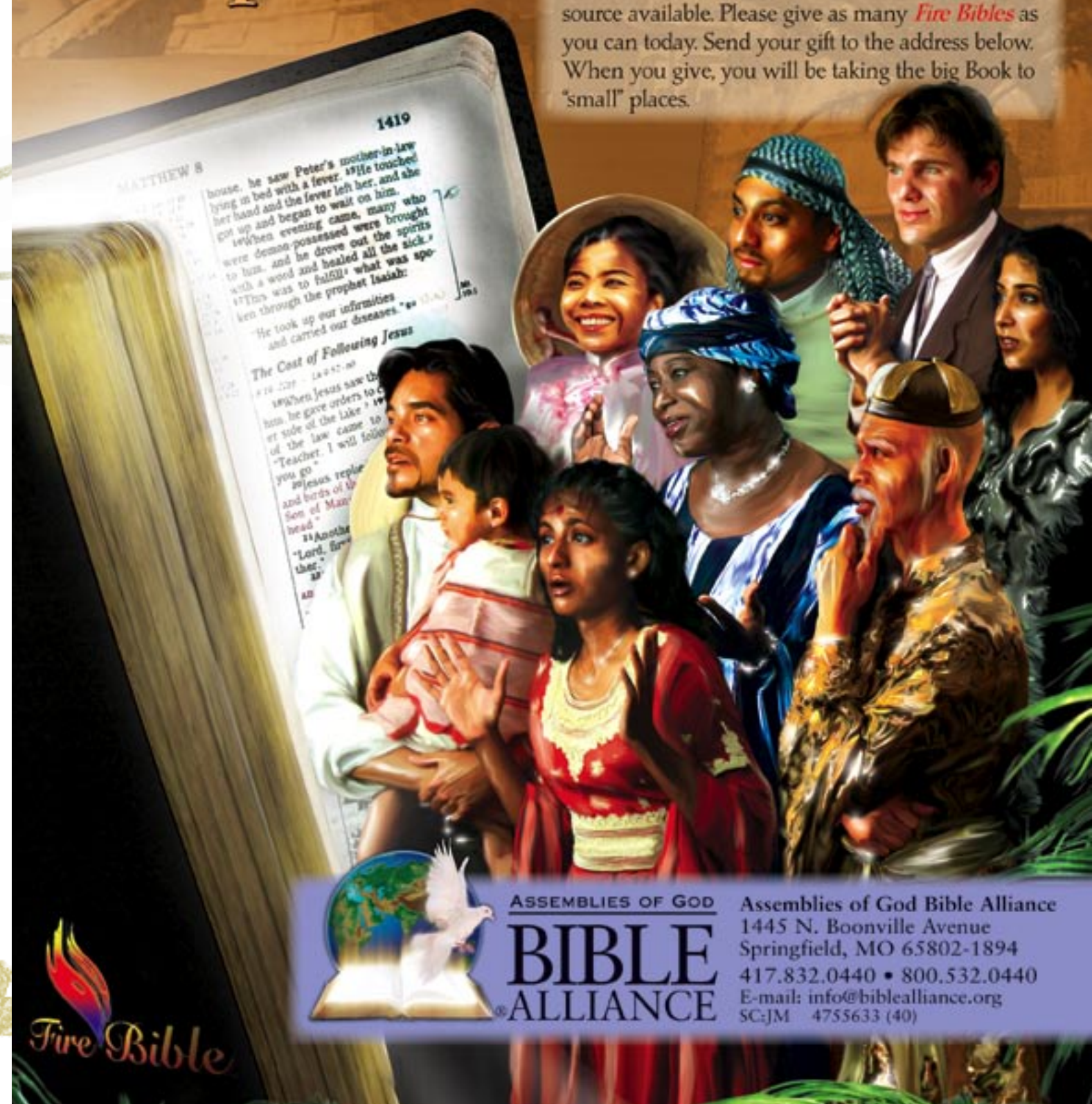
Eating fruit slowly is one of the best ways to end a fast. Because the body's metabolism has changed during a prolonged fast, gorging on rich or greasy foods to break the fast could be a shock to the system. **tpe**

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to prayer," St. John says. "We're making a desperate plea to God that we can't do this without Him. Fasting needs to be linked with an extended time with God. We don't have enough listening time when we pray."

Proponents say those on a fast should redeem the time they would have used consuming food, which can easily add up to two hours daily. If Christians simply engage in some activity such as watching television — or even working through lunch hour — the spiritual impact is minimized. St. John spends the time praying for backslidden children of pastors.

Fasting for the wrong reasons

Beyond health dangers (see sidebar on page 22) there are other potential risks in fasting. People fasting can become proud of their achievements; their goal can be to get in shape or get out of debt rather than truly discern God's direction; and the discipline can become routine if done every week.

In rare cases, people can become addicted to fasting, to the point where they become mentally unstable or they harm themselves from food deprivation.

Fasting isn't a method to make God love us more, and there's no prize for whoever goes the longest without food.

Perhaps the most common fallacy is that a Christian can coerce God into action, as if fasting is some sort of bargaining chip.

"Some people say, 'God, I'm fasting, so I should get this particular job, or this car or this money,'" Towns says. "It's like, 'I'll give you my food if you give me a new Mercury.'"

Going without food for a specific purpose is not solely a Christian concept. Practically every world religion promotes fasting, understanding the benefit of senses being sharpened when food no longer is a primary factor in daily life.

The reason some people fast isn't to discern God's will. For instance, in Acts 23:12-14, a group of Pharisees vowed not to eat until they had murdered the apostle Paul.

Jesus warned in Matthew 6:16 against fasting in order to be seen by others. In an age when Pharisees paraded their fasting in public pronouncements the Savior taught that fasting should be done secretly.

Pharisees regularly fasted twice a week (Luke 18:11,12) and boasted about the ritual observance. Jesus taught that fasting done for legalistic reasons and the wrong motive nullified its impact.

Unlike other religions, Christianity does not promote fasting as a means to earn rewards for good works.

And, as with giving, fasting is something Christians must determine in their hearts to do.

"If it's done to please the pastor, or out of compulsion, there won't be any results," Towns says. "God must be leading the individual."

Life-changing experience

In 1998, Mart Green began fasting for the first time in his life to seek the Lord's direction. Green, the founder of Mardel Christian & Educational Supply, says the Lord gave him creative ideas when he fasted lunch for a dozen days straight.

Green, a member of North Church, an Assemblies of God congregation in Edmond, Okla., next went on a 40-day fast. Instead of eating, he spent the time in prayer, Bible reading and Scripture memorization. On the 40th day, he established Bearing Fruit Communications, the entertainment company that recently produced *End of the Spear*, a feature film about the martyrdom of missionaries to Ecuador half a century ago.

The idea that God would lead him to become chief executive officer of a film company never would have occurred to Green on his own. In fact, Green hadn't even gone to a theater as a youth. Retail had been his trade, and he says he knew nothing about making movies until the Lord directed him to do so.

"My taste for this world changed after that fast," says Green, who has continued an annual custom of fasting for 40 days prior to Thanksgiving. "An eternity perspec-

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tive became much more in focus.”

Green’s times of feasting on the Lord have resulted in his gratitude to God for plentiful food, which he previously took for granted. “Living in North America, I never wondered where my next meal would come from,” Green says. “I’ve learned to appreciate food.”

The challenge

Church leaders endorse the idea of both regular and special fasts.

St. John believes Christians who are challenged to fast will accept the custom willingly and hear from the Lord more because of it.

“Fasting needs to be a part of every Christian leader’s life,” St. John says.

Novices don’t need to embark on a 40-day fast; one day of abstaining from food is a good beginning, St. John adds.

Towns says he already had gradu-

ated from three seminaries before he ever considered fasting. “Initially I was petrified because I was afraid I would get sick,” Towns told *TPE*. “But I did it for a day and found it’s not that bad.”

Advocates say churches will see dramatic results if members begin the practice. When Christians become serious about hearing God’s heart, it’s difficult to remain impassive about friends and neighbors who are going to hell, St. John says.

Keith leads his congregation in 40 days of fasting starting every January. “People who fast also pray more and give more,” he says. “Amazing things can happen when a congregation fasts and prays.” **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

“There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God’s forgiveness.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Romans 10:13

B. Believe in Jesus

(put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

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Guidance for Life

WARNING: Not everyone should fast

The Bible doesn’t issue warnings against fasting, but in American society there are vast numbers of people who, due to medical reasons, shouldn’t miss meals.

“If you have one of about 30 physical pathologies that require food, you would harm health if you fasted,” Elmer Towns says.

Included in the list of people who shouldn’t fast, according to Dr. Ingrid Kohlstadt, are women who are pregnant or breastfeeding; those recovering from surgery; people taking medications that require food; dieters; and those with thyroid conditions, certain heart conditions and diabetes.

Kohlstadt warns that persons with “pre-diabetes” (also called metabolic syndrome or insulin resistance) aren’t able to efficiently use body fat as a source of energy, so the body burns valuable muscle for energy during fasting.

Many people are unaware they have such a pre-diabetic condition, so it’s essential to seek guidance from a physician before starting an extended fast, Kohlstadt says. A physician specializing in nutrition or integrative medicine often can diagnose and offer treatment for pre-diabetes so that fasting for spiritual reasons is safe. Kohlstadt has more information on her Web site, INGRIDients.com. **tpe**

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