

John Wenham tells how beginning to fast triggered radical change

FAST IF YOU DARE

key points

- Fasting is a much-neglected spiritual discipline.
- It can bring to the surface the hidden desires of our hearts.
- It is a way to clear time for prayer and listening to God... but be ready to be surprised.

It was June 2011. I had been reading a copy of Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. The chapters on praying and giving had been satisfying as I recognised these as areas that I had spent plenty of time working on. Fasting, however, was a bit of a no-go zone for me. As a CMF student I had heard a talk on Matthew 6, where Jesus said, 'When you give...when you pray...and when you fast...'.¹ In other words, these are activities Jesus expects his followers to be doing. They're not optional extras. Other than one or two occasions when I had worked through lunch as a junior doctor, I do not recall ever being obedient to this expectation.

I learnt a lot about fasting from Foster.² Firstly, fasting must 'forever centre on God'. We are not to use it to bribe God any more than we would with giving or praying. Moreover, fasting and

worshipping should be done together. Then, fasting can bring the desires of our hearts to the surface; things that have controlled us silently will make themselves known. I found anger bubbling up in my first four fasts. After that I experienced a deep sadness as I understood more of God's view of my sin.

Foster offers a practical guide to fasting.³ He advises not to run before you can walk. He suggests undertaking a 24-hour fast from the end of one lunch to the beginning of the next; using fruit juice for fluid along with water on the first couple of occasions before embarking on a full 24 hours with water only. As I have always been a breakfast man who needs to be fuelled before work, skipping that meal was a concern for me.

I began after Wednesday lunchtimes in July 2011, partly for the sake of my patients as I had no clinics



willing to give it up?' Given the time and money we had invested in becoming a training practice by July 2010, I wasn't too enthusiastic.

On three separate occasions, not necessarily days on which I was fasting, a quiet voice in my head said, 'Put your house on the market.' Initially I dismissed it as me losing the plot. I really didn't want to move, despite Sarah's one-hour commute to Blackpool which was making childcare and family time difficult. By the third time I was sure it was the Holy Spirit's leading. After discussion with Sarah, we decided to obey and put our house up for sale.

I continued fasting weekly throughout August. On the day we signed the contract, Sarah panicked because we hadn't identified where we were going. I reassured her that if an offer came too quickly we could stall. I told her, further, I believed it would become clear where God wanted us to be.

A mere ten days later during some idle internet surfing, I came across an advert for a post with the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Broken Hill, Australia. Sarah for her part seemed sure she was meant to be in Blackpool. I thought it unlikely there would be sufficient work for her in Broken Hill, population 20,000.

A month later we attended a wedding in Sydney and agreed to fly up to Broken Hill and check it out. We looked at schools for Esther, our five year-old. Sarah met the palliative medicine specialist nurse. Five years previously they had drawn up a job description for a part-time consultant. As is common in the outback they never advertised, knowing how specialists prefer the financial packages available in the big cities. I was interviewed for the post at the RFDS and after references were checked, I was offered the job in December.

Remarkably, these words were CMF's verse for the week in the middle of September while we were looking at all this:

*Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland⁴*

Since August 2012 we work in the middle of the desert, a six-hour drive from Adelaide and twice as far from Sydney. Saltbush, the church plant where we are members, is only two years old and recently appointed its own pastor.

God has some pretty amazing plans to reveal to us; the main problem is with us making the time to listen.

John Wenham (pictured) works with the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Broken Hill, Australia.

on Thursdays. Initially I didn't tell my wife Sarah as she was late home. Pushing through Bible study group on Wednesday evening and avoiding the cake offerings was quite difficult. Then one Thursday morning I had to turn down the coffee Sarah had made. I realised it would have been more loving to warn her about what I was up to.

Once the hunger for the evening meal had passed, I was ok. I found myself feeling quite cold at night. I needed to drink more water than usual. I resolved to use the missed evening meal time to spend extra time with God; reading the Bible, spending more time listening and praying.

God levied two specific challenges during that month. In the context of Luke 9:23-25 there was a direct question, 'What do you cling to?' Immediately my mind identified the Practice. I had been settled in as joint senior partner for six years. 'Would I be



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references

1. Matthew 6:2-18
2. Foster R. *Celebration of Discipline*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009:67
3. *Ibid*:69
4. Isaiah 43:18-19