

The FAM Club

The FAM Club

by Carolyn Mahaney

Several years ago we created a Mahaney-family club, which we call The 5 AM Club. It involves rising early for the purpose of consistently meeting with God over his Word and in prayer. In January of 2006, we decided to brave it and invite you, our readers, to join our little club. Because we thought some might find the “early” aspect of club membership too dreadful, we didn’t expect many to join.

Boy, were we wrong! After our January post, scores of women (and even some men!) signed up” to join The 5 AM Club. Small groups around the country began to form 5:30 clubs or 6:15 clubs. To this day, we receive encouraging emails and letters from members who share with us the benefits of participating in this club. I can’t tell you how meaningful it is to hear those reports!

Well, we girls have started another club. This past year, we began fasting weekly and using the mealtime to pray for members of our family. We have dubbed it The FAM Club (acronym for Fast-A-Meal, also short for “Family” of course). During our planning time together this past Monday, we agreed that it would be fun to invite our readers to join our new club.

I know what some of you may be thinking: “Why are these crazy women’s clubs always centered around grueling goals such as getting up at the crack of dawn or skipping an entire meal every week? Why can’t they stick with fun clubs like book or cooking clubs?”

We understand. Our clubs might not seem so appealing at first. But given a chance, we think the rewards outweigh the sacrifice. And, like we did with the 5 AM Club, we want to examine what God’s Word has to say about the spiritual benefits of fasting and praying for our family.

So, will you join us for our discussion on prayer and fasting? It is our hope that by the time we’re through, you will want to join our FAM Club.

A Feast of Grace

by Carolyn Mahaney

I like a wide variety of foods. My husband on the other hand likes only a few foods – lobster and chocolate top his short list of favorites. I really like to eat. CJ doesn't care that much about eating, unless of course, lobster or chocolate are being served. It's difficult for me to miss a meal. Not for CJ. He actually forgets to eat meals at times!

Now I'm guessing more people can identify with me than with my husband. If so, maybe some of you can also relate to me when it comes to my practice of fasting. Sadly, it's been the one spiritual discipline I've ignored the most in Scripture and applied the least in my life.

In God's Word, though, it is clear that fasting is expected. This discipline is to be a part of every Christian's life. For example, Jesus instructs those listening to His Sermon on the Mount with the words: "When you fast...." (Matt. 6:16-17). He did not say, "If you fast." Jesus assumes that we will fast.

Why then, do we neglect to fast? Perhaps we don't fully grasp the purpose of fasting and the blessings that result from fasting.

Yet to do anything Jesus calls us to do—in this case, fasting—is to find true satisfaction and delight. As the prophet Jeremiah discovered: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jer. 15:16).

Scripture spreads out a feast of grace for "fasters." And that's one feast I don't want to miss out on!

More on the grace of fasting tomorrow...

An Earnest Prayer

by Carolyn Mahaney

Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable experience. Therefore, whenever we fast, we should do so for a spiritual purpose. Now there are many reasons for fasting given in Scripture. In chapter nine of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney actually comes up with no fewer than ten benefits of fasting! One reason is found in Ezra 8:21—

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods."

Fasting is humbling oneself before God to earnestly seek something from God. Or as Donald Whitney puts it, "Fasting strengthens our prayer life." It causes us to realize afresh our need for God; it increases our desperation for God's grace and intervention; it helps us to remember the true source of our help and sustenance; it seasons our requests with earnestness.

Now, as Dr. Whitney qualifies, "The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying."

How does it change our praying? "Fasting is calculated to bring a note of urgency and importunity into our praying...The man who prays with fasting is giving heaven notice that he is truly in earnest" (Arthur Wallis in Whitney).

What family member or friend's spiritual condition is of the greatest concern to you today? When you fast and pray for them you bring an appropriate "note of urgency" to your prayers. While we are only qualified to come before the throne of grace because of the death of Jesus Christ for our sins, fasting is a God-appointed means of expressing our desperate need for God's help.

And consider what happened when the Israelites humbled themselves, and earnestly sought the Lord: "*So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer*" (Ezra 8:23, NIV).

Scripture does indeed spread out a feast of grace for "fasters"! Through fasting He brings us to the end of ourselves and to the banquet table of His boundless grace and help in time of need. When we fast and petition our Savior, He hears and He answers our prayers.

A Desperate Need

by Nicole Whitacre

"In biblical times, fasting was a normal means of expressing contrition for sin and dependence upon God in the face of difficulty....Fasting continues to be an appropriate response for overwhelming difficulties in

our lives...it is appropriate for us to fast and seek the Lord's face...reminding ourselves that our normal state of life in this world is not fullness but hunger, and appealing for God to grant us what we so desperately need. We should not just appeal to God implicitly, however, through abstaining from food, as if fasting were simply another technique to accomplish our desires. Rather, we should appeal to the Great King explicitly through humble and persistent prayer, seeking his favor more fervently than a merely human solution to life's problems.” Iain Duguid

When it comes to “overwhelming difficulties” or “desperate needs” unsaved family members usually top our list. We might be the parent of a rebellious child (or a recalcitrant toddler!). Or maybe we have a hardened parent or an angry sibling or a wayward nephew or cousin or uncle or unrepentant grandparent whose unregenerate state weighs heavily on our heart.

Before long we realize that while we are responsible to love and evangelize (and in a parent’s case, correct and restrain) our unsaved family members, we can’t regenerate them. We can’t set up shop as soul-changers. We can’t exchange their heart of stone for one of flesh (Ez. 11:19).

Often we respond to this realization one of two ways. We either give up and retreat to despair; or we try harder, badger and nag, live in perpetual anxiety.

But instead of fatalism or fear, fasting is one a way to seek God’s “favor more fervently than a merely human solution to life’s problems.”

We need more than a human solution, don’t we?! And by “humble and persistent prayer” and fasting, we appeal to God to do what only He can do. We express our faith that He is not only able but also willing and eager to hear and to answer. We acknowledge our dependence on His grace and our hope in His goodness. We appeal to the Great Changer of Hearts to do what only He can do.

A Timely Reminder

by Nicole Whitacre

Fasting for our families invites God’s grace, strengthens our prayers, and testifies of our desperate need for God. But it also, quite simply, reminds us to pray. Here’s Iain Duguid again:

“If we find that we are forgetful to pray for a particular need, fasting will remind us to pray over and over through the alarm clock of our

hunger pangs! If we find ourselves short of time for prayer, fasting creates space to pray in the time we would otherwise have been eating.”

Several of you asked how to make time for prayer in the midst of busy lives. It's great if you are able, like my mom, to take advantage of the “space” a mealtime creates to get away and intercede on behalf of your family. But for me, with small children, that's a little impractical. I barely have time to eat as it is! And I imagine that if you are on the job or in the classroom, extended prayer time might be difficult to come by.

But my hunger pains, and my sense of weakness from a lack of food are like a snooze alarm ringing throughout the day. Each time I think—“I'm so hungry” or “I want food” (which is pretty often!) I take the opportunity to reaffirm that *yes, I am weak, I am powerless and that is why I am appealing to the All-Powerful One on behalf of my family members. I need food. But I need God even more. And so do my loved ones.*

By the time I break my fast, I find I've prayed for my family members many times—certainly more than if I had not fasted. I'm grateful for the reminder.

A Perfect Reward

by Carolyn Mahaney

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Matthew 6:16-18

There are three crucial points about fasting to glean from this verse: 1) The wrong way to fast, 2) The right way to fast, and 3) What to expect when you fast.

Here's how not to fast:

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”

“In other words, if the reward you aim at in fasting is the admiration of others, that is what you will get, and that will be all you get.” *John Piper*

We're to do it this way instead:

“But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

"God sees us fasting. He sees that...we have come to him out of weakness to express our need and our great longing that he would manifest himself more fully in our lives [or in the life of our family member!] And when God sees this, he responds. He acts. He rewards." *John Piper*

And finally, we should expect a reward:

"And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"God will bless a biblical fast by any of His children. And whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. And none of His rewards is worthless." *Donald Whitney*

It is not more spiritual or godly to expect nothing when we fast; to view fasting as merely an exercise in self-denial. No, we should eagerly anticipate the reward. God has told us that He will reward our fasting precisely because he wants us to be on the lookout for His blessing. True, it may not come in the way we expected. But it will come. And it will be good. That's for sure.

No More Fasting

by Carolyn Mahaney

“And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.” Mark 2:19-20

This is the “day,” the time to fast. While we have the Holy Spirit's presence with us, we are not yet united with Christ in heaven. We still live in this

broken world where we experience hardship and trouble. “At present,” wrote the author of Hebrews, “we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (2:9). And so we fast.

Iain Duguid once again:

“So we fast at present, since Jesus is no longer with us in his physical presence. Now we experience the pain and fallenness of this world in full measure and cry out to God in the midst of our pain and doubt. But this world is not the ultimate measure of reality. A day is coming when we will no longer fast. When Jesus comes back there will be no more fasting, as well as on more crying, and no more pain. There will be feasting forever in the presence of the King for all of the King’s redeemed people. And then, at last, we shall share in his glory and taste the fullness of his goodness.”

The best thing about fasting is that we won’t always need to fast.

The ultimate reward of fasting is waiting for us in eternity. There, we shall “share in his glory and taste the fullness of his goodness.” Instead of trouble there will be peace. Instead of sadness there will be joy. Instead of fasting there will be feasting.

We’ll be with Jesus. And we will see everything in subjection to him.

FAM Club Qualified

by Janelle Bradshaw

A lot of you moms out there who are pregnant or nursing have written to ask about fasting in this season of motherhood. Of course you shouldn’t fast! We’re not medical doctors here at girtalk, but this much we know: pregnant and nursing women shouldn’t be skipping meals. Growing babies need lots of yummys to stay healthy. That’s why I’ve temporarily resigned from the FAM club for a while.

Some of you may have a particular physical condition that would make it unwise to fast. Please—have a talk with your doc and get whatever info you need to make an informed decision. Sound like a plan? Good.

Even if you are unable to abstain from food because of a baby or a physical condition, this doesn’t mean you can’t fast at all. Listen to what Donald Whitney suggests:

“A biblical definition of fasting is a Christian’s voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes....Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body, it is abstinence from food for spiritual purposes....There is a broader view of fasting that is often overlooked. Fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, or from the media, from the telephone, from talking, from sleep, etc. in order to become more absorbed in a time of spiritual activity.”

So, if you can’t fast food in this season, maybe you can consider refraining from watching a particular TV show, or checking facebook or talking on the telephone for a set period of time in order to pray for your family members. See, we can all still be a part of the FAM club—fasting for the purpose of praying for our family.

Next week: testimonies from other women and more thoughts on praying for your loved ones.

FAM Club Alum

by Nicole Whitacre

We’re thrilled that so many of you are eager to join the FAM Club. We can’t wait to hear testimonies of answered prayer and changed hearts as together we practice this grace-filled discipline. Some of the most encouraging emails we’ve received in the past few weeks have been from women who have already been faithful to fast and pray for their families. We hope their testimonies inspire you as well:

“Welcome to the club!” wrote Becky, “I was excited to read your blog today! You are embarking on a wonderful, rewarding new “club”. My husband, Nick, and I have been using our day off together for the past couple of year to fast and pray for our family, close friends and their families as well as other needs that come to mind during our prayer time. We have had numerous answers to those prayers and continue to look for more. How wonderful it will be to know that there are many, many other families involved in seeking our Father in this way and seeing the results of those prayers!”

Leslie emailed to say: *“I was so encouraged by your blog about starting a FAM club. I just wanted to share with you what the Lord has taught me about fasting and prayer. Years ago I heard that Shirley Dobson fasted every Thursday for her family. I was inspired by her example but I also love to eat, besides I have been either pregnant or nursing so I didn't even*

consider it a possibility. About a year and a half ago I read John Piper's book entitled Hunger for God. The Lord really used Piper's teaching to give me a greater vision for fasting. Since then, He has really helped me (and I mean REALLY helped me, because I do struggle with gluttony!) to faithfully fast and pray for my husband, children, and church. I cannot express to you how much I now view fasting as a true grace from God. The Lord has been so incredibly kind to meet my meager sacrifice of food to deepen my relationship with Him. Once again the Lord has given me so much more than I could have ever thought or imagined... greater love and gratitude for Him. So thank you for being sensitive to the Holy Spirit and encouraging other ladies into this wonderful practice."

Finally, Caroline told us of her mother's inspiring example: *"My Mum fasted one lunchtime a week throughout my and my brothers' childhoods and I know we all benefited from it. We all came to know God at very early ages (around 4 years of age) and none of us wavered from our walk, even in our teens. I know that that is partly the great example my parents were, and the way they brought us up, but I have always said that I would fast in the same way for my family. Sadly, breastfeeding etc. stopped it and as my twins turned 3 last week, I have not started fasting. I am SO grateful for your nudge and will gladly join you all in your weekly fasts. I want my children to have an even greater walk with God than the one He has given me."*

A Praying Mother

by Carolyn Mahaney

This story from a book I am currently reading--*Mothers of the Wise and Good* by Jabez Burns--is a wonderful complement to the testimonies we heard yesterday. May this story of a woman who lived many years ago encourage us that it is never too late to begin fasting and praying for our children:

In a seaport town of New England lived a pious mother of six daughters. At the age of sixty, she had been for many years subject to disease and infirmity, which confined her to her house, and almost to her room. In an interview one day with a friend, she said—"I had not for many years enjoyed the pleasure of going to the house of God with his people, and taking sweet counsel with them. But I have another source of grief greater than this—one that weighs down my spirits day and night! while disease and pain bear my body toward the grave." Her friend tenderly inquired the cause of this peculiar grief. She replied, "I have six daughters; two are married and live

near me, and four are with me; but not one of them gives any evidence of piety. I am alone. I have no one for a Christian companion. O that even one of them were pious, that I might walk alone no longer." Such was her language. Yet she seemed submissive to the will of God, whatever it might be, having strong confidence, that in his own good time, he would answer her daily prayers, and in a way which would best advance his glory.

Not long after the above interview, a revival of religion commenced in the town in which she lived. Among the first subjects of this work were four of her daughters. A fifth was soon added to their number, but the other, the eldest, remained unmoved. One day one of the young converts proposed to her mother and her converted sisters to observe a day of fasting and prayer for the sister who remained so insensible. The agreement was made, and a day observed. Of this the subject of their prayers had no knowledge. But on the same day, while engaged in her domestic concerns at home, her mind was solemnly arrested; and she was soon added to the Christian sisterhood.

The praying mother lived a few years to enjoy their Christian society. They surrounded her dying bed, received her last blessing, and unitedly commended her spirit to God.

Our Stimulus to Persevering Prayer

by Carolyn Mahaney

The FAM Club is all about fasting *for the purpose of praying for our family*.

The state of our family members' souls before God should drive us to prayer and fasting. We don't fast and pray so our kids will get better grades or win the big game on Saturday night. We don't intercede merely so our parents will have a plush retirement or our siblings will succeed in their careers or our cousin will get married.

Our concern is much deeper. Our requests far greater. We beseech God to protect our family members from worldliness, or to rescue them from sin's entanglement. We ask God to give them an undying love and passion for the Savior. We pray that God would strengthen their faith and uphold them in the midst of trials.

We long—above all else—that our unsaved family members would repent and believe in Jesus Christ; that they would know Him and experience eternal life.

This quote by Charles Bridges aptly expresses both our fervent hopes and the faith with which we ought to pray. Even though it was written to parents, it applies no matter which family member you are praying for:

But do we mourn over the evil of our child, especially when tracing it to its original source? Oh! let it be our stimulus to earnest and persevering prayer, and to the diligent use of the appointed means for that entire change of heart and nature, which we so intensely desire....The answer may be delayed. But "though it tarry, wait for it. For at the end it shall come; it shall not tarry." Meanwhile "live by faith" (Heb. 2: 3, 4); work in faith. Never forget that we serve "the God of Hope." Despair not of his grace. Doubt not his faithfulness. Hold on in active energy and patient hope. The tears of despondency shall be changed into tears of joy, giving a happy glow of warmth to every tender remonstrance, and animating every prudential effort...."The end of the Lord" will put unbelief to shame. (James 5:11.)

Whether or not you've been praying for a family member for many years or only just begun, we must "hold on in active energy and patient hope." We must faithfully and earnestly preach the gospel to unsaved family members. We must encourage and correct those who are wayward. But we must always pray with confidence in the goodness of our God, for "The end of the Lord" will put unbelief to shame."

Augustine's Mother

by Kristin Chesemore

The most famous of all praying mothers is probably Monica, the mother of Augustine. She has encouraged women for centuries to persevere in praying for their children, and her example can inspire us today as we pray for our family members. Jabez Burns (in the book Mom is reading, Mothers of the Wise and Good) quotes Augustine who relates the nature of his mother's persistent prayers:

"While I was yet walking in sin, often attempting to rise, and sinking still deeper, my dear mother, in vigorous hope, persisted in earnest prayer for me. I remember also, that she entreated a certain bishop to undertake to reason me out of my errors. 'Your son,' says he, 'is

too much elated at present, and carried away with the pleasing novelties of his opinion, to regard any argument. Let him alone, only continue praying to the Lord for him; in the course of his study he will discover his error.' All this satisfied not my anxious parent; with floods of tears she still persisted in her request, till a little out of patience, with her importunity, he said, 'Be gone, good woman, it is impossible that the child of such tears should perish.'"

Augustine did repent and put his trust in Christ at the age of 32. His conversion was yet another monument to the faithfulness of God in answering a persistent mother's prayers.

FAM Club Finale

by Janelle Bradshaw

Today concludes our series of FAM Club posts. But The FAM Club has only just begun. How excited we are that so many of you are eager to join us in fasting at least one meal a week for the purpose of praying for members of your family! We look forward to hearing testimonies of prayers answered, and God's love and faithfulness on full display.

We leave you with selections from a *Valley of Vision* prayer that express the heart and desire behind the FAM Club: that our Savior be glorified in our lives and in the lives of our family members.

"O God, I cannot endure to see the destruction of my kindred.

Let those that are united to me in tender ties

be precious in thy sight and devoted to thy glory....

Let not those of my family who are amiable, moral, attractive,
fall short of heaven at last;

Grant that the promising appearances of a tender conscience,
soft heart, the alarms and delights of thy Word,

be not finally blotted out,

but bring forth judgment unto victory in all whom I love."*

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