

Free at Last!

The Power of the Gospel to Overcome Eating Disorders

Debra Fehsenfeld

In my teenage years, I became a slave to bulimia. I loved and enjoyed food, but I didn't want it to "catch up with me." How delighted I was to find this way of eating what I wanted without consequences—or so I thought. More and more of my life began to center around food binges. I made my decisions about who I would be with, what I would do, and when I would do it based on my growing addiction.

No one knew, and my happiness seemed to depend on their *not* finding out. I lived for those binges. In those moments, I could live without limitations—except, of course, the swollen glands, the strained relationships, the wasted opportunities, and the perpetual sense of guilt and fear that I would be discovered. But I could eat anything I wanted!

Sounds crazy, yet this was life for me, and I chose it again and again over losing my "freedom." Eventually, however, I began to desire a life beyond food. So I decided I would stop. I read books, obtained jobs, and chose college and graduate courses all with the primary purpose of learning how to be free from the chains of this relentless addiction.

And I would quit . . . for a day, a week, even months, at times. But the addiction would never leave. When life became too hard, I would comfort myself by appointing a day for an uninterrupted binge. When that anticipated day was unwittingly disrupted by an unsuspecting friend or relative, or by some unanticipated circumstance, I experienced the ensuing restraint as an untamed beast experiences a cage. No matter how hard I tried, brief periods of abstinence were the best I could do. My mind and heart were literally obsessed by food.

During my years in graduate school, I began to feel concern for my soul. I felt so guilty. I knew that God was not pleased with what I was doing. I reasoned that even if He would tolerate my binging and purging, He certainly hated the lying, stealing, and manipulating that came with it. These were essential,

though, since secrecy was my only means of "peaceful" continuance in sin. What an absolutely miserable existence!

After completing graduate school, my husband and I began attending an evangelical church, and I started reading the Bible. I was without a job, and God raised up a Jesus-following lady who hired me to transcribe her personal journals. As I read of her own failures and battles with self-indulgence, I saw an unmistakable difference. Her happiness was in God. My happiness was in food. When she struggled, she responded by ultimately forsaking the sinful indulgence out of greater love for and delight in God. When I struggled, I turned from God and His ways out of greater love for food.

All I could do was groan to God. I felt it would kill me to permanently stop practicing bulimia. It would mean giving up all of what I knew and loved (though also hated) about life. I could not do that. I knew I couldn't.

About this same time, a guest speaker came to our church and shared his testimony of how God's power had set him free from the sin of gluttony. I was surely the most attentive person present that day! When he said, "If you want to stop sinning, memorize Scripture," I began immediately. It didn't work in the magical, instantaneous way I had hoped, but I kept on in sheer desperation. I spent hour upon hour, day after day memorizing, reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures. I continued to groan and plead with God for help, for freedom.

My desire for freedom increased all the more as I came to see more and more the beauty of Christ, and the peace and happiness that surely belonged to all who could walk with Him freely. But that was not yet my privilege. Would it, could it ever be? *I wondered and hoped.*

One day in the midst of study and meditation, the first of several links in the chains of bondage was broken. For a long time I had known that the word *gospel* meant "good news," yet it wasn't until this moment that it dawned on me why "good news" was the phrase used for describing the work of Christ. Christ had died for sin. By His death He freed me from the penalty of sin. This much I knew. But by His resurrection, *new life* had come for all who were His.

What I realized in that moment was that Jesus was the One with the power to make me free, and He would do it by making me altogether *new*! I knew from hard experience that I could never stand against the power bulimia had over me. I would be its slave forever. My only hope was the possibility that the old me would die and be remade, reborn, a new person in Christ.

As I responded to God in faith, I began to experience a new desire. Before this time, I had always wanted to be free so that *I* could live without hindrance. For the first time, I wanted to be free so that I could love my God and Savior with all my heart and soul—the way He deserves! Something had indeed changed.

So, did I quit practicing bulimia from that day forward? No. In fact, I betrayed my new Master many times. But something about even the process of failure was incredibly different. *He* remained faithful to me. He blessed me so richly every time I was in His presence that I came to *love* His presence. And captivated in this way continually, I found myself bingeing and purging less and less frequently, until one day I realized I didn't need to practice it at all. *I was happy without it.*

I never could have imagined it possible, but the truth had set me free! Jesus had become more important, more satisfying, and more desirous than the sweetest, most appealing of foods!

That was about fifteen years ago now, and I am still free. In fact, I am *more* free. Do I ever feel old desires creeping in? Yes. Do I ever think too much about food? Sometimes. But I am experiencing the amazing grace and invincible power of God, who is remaking me in every way. Because He *has* freed me and *I am being freed* still, I know that one day I will be completely, *altogether* freed—made perfectly like Jesus with no distractions, no impulse toward sin, in order to serve, worship, and love Him forever!

There is not a day that passes that I don't marvel at what He has done for me. I love Him and run after Him and His ways because He has set me free. Yes, the gospel is "good news." It is indeed the power of God unto salvation (freedom)! And yes, now I have a new obsession: freedom for all in Christ! "Because Your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you . . . I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods" (Psalm 63:3-5).

. . . Stopping the practice of bulimia was just the beginning of a whole new life, but it was an important beginning. It was through this time that I first began to believe that God is powerful beyond the grasp of my imagination. I want to share some insights that have been helpful to me throughout the process of being delivered from this bondage.

I have come to believe that the basic pattern for change is the same no matter what the habit or addiction: dependence on God, trusting Him for help one day at a time, purposing to avoid the "triggers," adding health-promoting

routines, and becoming saturated with the truth of God. My particular battle was with bulimia, so that is what I reference here. However, I believe that these same principles can be applied to those seeking freedom from other destructive habits and addictions. These are the same things I continue to practice, seeking God for greater and greater freedom from the rule of anyone or anything but Him.

1. Cry Out to God

Confession

If you are in bondage, there is no way to complete freedom but by *His* power. Let Him know that you know you need Him and that you can do nothing to free yourself. Acknowledge before Him that you deserve nothing but punishment from Him, having failed to love Him above all other things. Cry out to Him for mercy.

Honesty

Tell Him, if you can honestly, that you hate that food has taken from Him your love and energy. Express your desire to give Him all your heart's affections. If you find yourself just saying words, without your heart and mind being engaged, admit that to Him. Be completely honest before your Savior. Honesty is essential for healing. Ask God to reveal to you the truth about your own heart.

Deception

At times we may assume that, *of course, we want to be free*—it would be crazy for us not to want to break free of enslavement to the rule of food in our lives—and that we want to be free so we can love *God* more than anything or anyone. But these assumptions may not be true. Because we want or assume something to be true about our hearts does not make it true. Do not expect to find honesty and purity in your heart. When we put our hearts under the searchlight of Scripture, we will usually find an admixture of both holy and unholy desires and passions.

Without the Word of God as our “mirror,” we can’t know what is really true of our own hearts. What are we to do when we recognize that though we want to love Him with all our heart, and to be free from the rule of bulimia, we find ourselves repeatedly making choices that lead us to a binge/purge? And what are we to do when we find ourselves insisting, at least mentally, that we really do love God more than food, though we may be in the same moment in the midst of a binge? We ask God to purify our hearts, and help us see any deception that is there. Begin to notice what you say, think, and do, especially in regard to food, and come before God in the light of His revealing truth.

Petition

Make this the prayer of your heart: “O God, You know my heart. I want to be free from bulimia [or whatever the sinful addiction may be]; I want to love You with all my heart, but I realize that as of yet, I do not. I know this because I continue to hold on to my old ‘love.’ You are worthy of all my love. For the sake of Your name, will You make me absolutely pure in devotion and love for You.” Every time you recognize you have mixed desires and passions in your heart, get before your Helper and Healer quickly. Keep coming back to Him. If you come to Him in this manner, acknowledging and confessing failure, mixture in motivation and desire, and committing yourself to live in obedience to His Word, you will receive help.

Though your love for Him may not yet be all you want it to be, if it is your aim and intent to love Him supremely, you may be sure that He will hear and respond to your cries for freedom.

2. Trust God for Today

Trust Him to help you this day to eat healthy and to avoid a binge/purge. Do not tell yourself, “I am *never* again going to binge/purge.” Rather, pray: “Help me, please, Lord, and by Your grace, I will obey You today.” Trust Him to supply you with the strength, perseverance, and love that you need to obey Him *today*. Then prove your trust by making decisions and choices about what foods you will eat with love for God and His Word as your rule. We are brought to freedom and changed day by day.

3. Avoid "Trigger" Foods

There have been, more than likely, some particular foods that you eat during a binge—foods you would not eat if you weren't planning a purge. While you are still so vulnerable to going back to your old master and “love” through habit, you must wait to reintroduce these foods into your diet. Some of these foods, you may never choose to eat again. Eat foods that you feel good about putting into your body, and do not overeat.

4. Add Exercise to Your Daily Routine

Your goal is not only to stop binging/purging, but to become healthy because you are God's and want to make the best possible utilization of all that He has entrusted to you for His glory. Besides contributing to your physical health, exercise will also help to energize you and get you going. We are much more inclined to binge or overeat when we feel sluggish or low in energy.

An Offering of Thanks

Think of exercise as your thanksgiving offering to God. As an offering it requires sacrifice. Let this “sacrifice” be an expression of your thanks to God for giving you the health necessary for exercise.

Warning

If you find exercise is becoming for you another form of “purge,” acknowledge that and deal with it before God in the same intentional way you are dealing with food. Just as with food, “dealing with it” does not mean you quit it altogether, but that you must not allow it to “rule” over you. We have but one Master—Christ the King!

5. Be Saturated with the Truth

Memorize Scripture (during exercise is a great time for this!), study, listen to sermons, read books to help you understand the Word of God, praise Him because of the truth you are discovering. Do everything you can to get the truth of God into you. “Feed” on it. “Savor” it. Think about it just as you have done with food. Just as food ascended to the high ground in your life, now let the Word of God overtake that ground and stand alone in its priority in and governance over your life.

Aim So As to Obtain

Your life is found in the Word of God (Deuteronomy 8:3; John 6:63). Seek Him in His Word like you believe this. Press forward to take hold of this life that’s truly life, and don’t let go until you possess it fully! To those who seek Him, believing that what He says is true and, by faith, acting in obedience to His word, He *will* grant freedom. You can be freed from bulimia, and as you continue to seek Him in this way, you will gain increasing freedom from enslavement to food. You will be freed to love and serve your good Master!

You May Wonder . . .

“If I ‘saturate’ myself in the Bible, will I really be freed from bulimia?”

God’s word is not a “magic wand.” It does not “zap” us with freedom (as I had first expected). Freedom is granted according to our faith in God (faith is a merciful gift from God, not something we can manufacture naturally). We must ask ourselves, “Do I believe what He says?” “Do I

believe that His love is more satisfying than the richest of foods? . . . that in His presence is the fullest measure of joy that can be known? . . . that He is powerful enough to do anything? . . . that He is wise and very good?"

Believe God

Bible knowledge itself does not free anyone. Many have memorized and studied the Word of God and never been changed. You can read it, memorize it, and study it, and never be changed. According to Hebrews 4:2, "the gospel was preached to [the Old Testament Jews in the wilderness]; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it" (NKJV).

The change, the freedom comes when you read, memorize, study, *believing* God. You do not know when or how He will do what He promises, but you believe He will. You "hold on" to Him and His Word, obeying Him because you believe Him. You release your grip on things that you "love" because you believe that what He has is better. "Faith without works is dead." If we say we believe that God's love is more satisfying than the richest of foods, yet still plan and engage in a binge, where is the evidence of our faith?

Greater Faith

Perhaps you believe God enough to pray, but not enough to change. If you find yourself lacking in faith, not really believing Him, ask God for faith to believe Him more—ask for the mercy of *greater* faith. Then begin again obeying Him, believing that you have been granted the faith you asked of Him.

"Will it be easy for me to stop binging/purging?" No—not if you are truly ensnared. It may be easier for some than others—depending on how established old habits are. Habits do not change without intentional change and commitment. Sinful habits must be broken and replaced. Do not expect this to be easy.

6. Seize Pivotal Moments

It is in the midst of the most intense moments of temptation—those moments when everything in you feels drawn to doing what you have become accustomed to doing—that you have the opportunity to embrace and cling to God's grace to break those habits and to be freed. When you feel the old, familiar draw, you can be sure you *will* do what you *have been doing* unless you *purposefully* do something different. The "something different" can be any number of things—play with your children, pray for someone, pay bills, write a letter, go for a walk . . . It ought to be something active, not just mental. Do "something different" while depending on God, praising Him and reminding yourself afresh of the truth that you have come to believe: His love is more satisfying than the richest of foods!