

How My Family of Seven Spent Nothing For a Month

By Shelley Leith

Our adventure began spontaneously on September 19, 2004. We had gathered our five children, ages 11 to 17, for our weekly family devotions. My husband, Greg, had been saving a newspaper article to show us, to help the kids really get how fortunate we are to have food and clothing and shelter and health. I had recently taken our 16- and 17-year-olds on a short-term missions trip to Kenya, so we were fresh from seeing these sights up close. Our discussion was convicting and action-oriented, and turned quickly to trying to figure out what concrete thing our family could do to help. Greg, in an inspired but completely impulsive moment, blurted out, “What if we didn’t buy anything for a whole month? We might feel a little bit of what it’s like to do without, like the boys in this picture. And, how much money do you think that would save? We could donate it to an African relief organization!”



The article that started it all

Well, life as we knew it was over from that moment on. I sat there in shock as this idea gained momentum, and before you could say “Bob’s yer uncle,” we had decided to stop spending money there and then for an entire month. Just think about that for a minute. I hadn’t had a chance to stockpile any food, lay aside supplies, or plan ahead. I couldn’t revert to my earthquake disaster kit, because I had never made an earthquake disaster kit! But, I’m always up for a good adventure of taking God at his Word, and since he promises to supply all our needs, I was game!

And thus it started. We decided to allow two exceptions to our spending fast: we bought gas for the car, and we bought milk, so that we could eat cereal for our meals if need be. In Week 1, as we were just getting going, Greg remembered that he had promised Carson, our 12-year-old, a new bottle of cologne to replace the one he used up. He took him to the drug store for this one exception, which he thought would be okay since it was a “preexisting commitment.” But Carson stood there, looking at the colognes, and said, “Dad, I don’t need cologne when children in Africa don’t even have any food. Let’s give that \$10 to Africa.” When a friend named Dean heard that story, he asked Greg, “Is God allowed to provide things for you through other people during this month?” Greg said he thought that would be okay. So Dean took out his wallet, pulled out a \$10 bill, and said, “You tell Carson that God wanted to give him that cologne.” When Greg gave the money to Carson, he held onto it all month so he wouldn’t be spending any money, then ended up donating it too.

In Week 2, Heather was running for secretary of the sixth-grade class, which typically would have involved buying posterboard and art supplies, and a new outfit to wear while giving her campaign speech. Instead, she had to create her entire campaign using things she found around the house. She won her campaign, even though she used recycled paper bags for posters, crepe paper streamers and stickers for decorations, and resurrected an old dress to wear for her speech.

In Week 3, Heather lost a contact lens, and the optometrist’s office gave her a sample pair for free.

In Week 4, our small group asked us how our experiment was going, and we mentioned that we had just run out of bread and butter. They sent us home with bread and butter. Plus, I kept finding little stashes of butter left over from lunch meetings at work!

That weekend, during the special offering at church for feeding the homeless, I found \$35 in my purse to give that had been there all month because I hadn’t spent any money. The next day was Canadian Thanksgiving, which we like to celebrate to remember our Canadian roots, but of course we had no turkey. In cleaning out a desk, I ran across a gift certificate to Honeybaked Ham that Heather had won in a coloring contest weeks earlier. She had not been at all thrilled when she won that contest, but now her prize became a part of God’s provision for our family at the end of our spending fast. Mind you, instead of the traditional Thanksgiving meal we served the ham with stewed tomatoes and chicken noodle soup, but we have never had a more memorable Thanksgiving dinner.

As we sat around the Thanksgiving table, we each shared our hardest moments from the month. For Jason, age 15, it was when he wished he could buy Donettes after school. For Ryan, 16, it was when he was feeling lightheaded from hunger and couldn't buy a snack. Heather missed having bread with which to make sandwiches for lunch. I whined when I didn't have butter (I love butter), and my true sacrifice came when I ran out of Coke. Aaaugh!

Then, we shared our lessons learned. We first of all realized that it is very hard in our culture to feel like we have to rely on God. Because we have our needs met, and most of our wants met too, we don't really get to experience what it feels like to need God, or to have to depend upon his day-to-day provision. But, in looking back over our hardest moments, they were so puny, really, in comparison to the true and drastic needs that we were trying to relate to in Africa. We recalled what we had eaten over the month, and it was surprising how well we ate without buying any groceries. By the end of the month our combinations were getting rather weird (like noodles with olive oil, canned oysters, and Mini-Wheats), but our little refrigerator freezer and our cupboards had enough food stashed away to feed a family of seven adequately for a whole month. That was shocking, frankly. I had no idea I had such a backlog of inventory! We rejoiced in God's provision, not only through what we already had, but through the generosity of friends who acted as conduits of God's gifts by giving us food.

Another lesson was voiced by Ryan, who observed that it was hard to do without when we're so used to buying things we want without thinking twice about it. All of the kids said that they were surprised at how spending is such an unconscious thing. The pervasiveness of our consumer culture really hit home. Before this month, they didn't realize how much they assumed they could just get or do things that required money without even considering the money part. It was a little shock every time they faced what this spending fast really meant. "Oh! I can't rent a video." "Oh! We can't go to McDonald's." "Oh! I can't buy something from the vending machine." "Oh! I can't go bowling with the youth group." "Oh! You can't get me a new binder for Science."

As we added it all up, our spending fast resulted in us *not* spending \$1,300 that month on groceries, supplies, recreation, and eating out. Our highlight was when our whole family went together to meet the head of an African relief organization, and we got to hand him our gift. The lessons of learning to say "no" to ourselves instead of saying "yes" to whatever we wanted were well worth the sacrifice, and more than rewarded with the joy of feeling like we did something tangible to help people with *real* needs. Thank God for my husband's inspired impulsiveness!