

# A Fast for Waters That Do Not Fail (Part 1)

by John Piper

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*John Piper's sermon explores the spiritual significance of fasting as taught in Isaiah 58, emphasizing the importance of motives and service to others.*

**Duration:** 35:51

**Scripture:** Psalm 107:9, Proverbs 11:25, Isaiah 58:9, Matthew 11:28-30, Matthew 25:35-36, John 4:14, Revelation 21:5

**Topics:** "Missionary Work", "Spiritual Freedom"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker, Doug Nichols, emphasizes the importance of taking action and praying for more missionaries to bring the gospel to children suffering from malnutrition and preventable diseases. He then focuses on the significance of Luke chapter 4, suggesting that Jesus was deeply connected to this chapter. The speaker highlights specific verses from Luke 4, emphasizing Jesus' mission to preach the gospel to the poor, release captives, restore sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free. He encourages listeners to give themselves to the hungry and afflicted, promising that their light will rise in darkness and they will receive guidance, satisfaction, and strength from the Lord.

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## Transcript

If you'd like to follow along and you didn't bring your Bible today, there are a few Bibles, and that's found on page 884, Isaiah 58, 9b-14. If you remember the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness, and your gloom will become like midday, and the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones, and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail, and those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins. You will raise up age-old foundations, and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

If because of the Sabbath you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord Honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from speaking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth, and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken. One of the greatest preachers of the first thousand years of the church was a man named John Chrysostom.

He was the Bishop of Constantinople in the 4th century, and the reason I mention him is because he fasted a lot, and he said some great things about fasting. He was an ascetic. You know, that word means that you're hard on your body, and you do a lot of rigorous things, and his lifestyle was such that he offended the emperor of the eastern part of the empire named Arcadius and his wife Eudoxia a lot, so much so that near the end of his life, which shouldn't have been near the end of his life, they banished him out of Constantinople, and he died on a rigorous journey to where they were sending him in 407 A.D. The reason I mention him is just so that I can quote for you one of the most remarkable tributes to fasting that I've ever read, probably is the most remarkable that I've read, and it goes like this.

This is what he wrote. Fasting is, as much as lies in us, an imitation of the angels, a condemning of things present, a school of prayer, a nourishment of the soul, a bridle of the mouth, an abatement of concupiscence. It mollifies rage.

It appeases anger. It calms the tempests of nature. It excites reason.

It clears the mind. It disburdens the flesh. It chases away night pollutions.

It frees from headache. By fasting, a man gets composed behavior, free utterance of his tongue, right apprehensions of his mind. Now, all of those accolades do not come true for everybody every time you fast.

For example, it does not for everybody every time remove, but in fact gives headaches. If you've ever fasted in any extended way, you'll know that there are all kinds of varied responses, and one of the, I believe, lying messages that we get during fasting is that this is so bad it cannot be of any spiritual value. You ever get that message? Well, I've gotten that message a lot, and there is a point where that probably becomes true.

But don't jump to conclusions because there is some adverse physical effect on you that therefore it has no spiritual value. Don't make that quick jump because it is precisely in the adversity of it that the value of it can also rise. A synonym for fasting, as we'll see, is to afflict or to humble oneself.

The whole point is to feel discomfort. There are dangers. In fasting, I said last week, it is true that the bridegroom has been taken away, and he said that when the bridegroom is gone, the disciples will fast, and it is a good thing to do.

It should have accolades, but we started last week noticing that there are dangers. And I don't just mean physical dangers. I don't mainly mean physical dangers, although the sheet that I promised you is out there now.

If you want to read what a doctor who's spent a lifetime studying and practicing fasting has to say about the practice and its warnings and how to move into it and out of it and what kinds of things to drink and eat in order to make it appropriate and healthy, take one of those sheets and read it. But what I have in mind is spiritual danger, and we began with that with Jesus last week. Remember what he said.

He said, one of the great spiritual dangers of fasting is that you might do it with the motive to be seen by other people. And if you do it with that motive, you've got your reward. That's it.

It works. It succeeds. They see you, and there's your reward.

You have it. The Father in heaven will not add to that reward. You've got your reward.

If that's what you want, you get it and no more. So there's a great spiritual danger that we might fast for the wrong motives, namely human praise, get what we're after, and it's over. There's no spiritual dimension to it.

That would be a terrible, terrible thing. Now, today, Isaiah, or better, God, through Isaiah gives us a second warning about how not to fast. And this chapter, to me, Isaiah 58, is not just a fitting conclusion to our series on fasting, which it is.

This week and next week, I'm going to spend on this chapter, and then we'll be done with this series. It's not just a fitting conclusion to the series on fasting. To me, this chapter is a magnificent insight into the heart of Jesus, even though it was written 700 years before he came on the scene, and it has a tremendous bearing, I feel personally right now, on where we are as a church and where we're going.

When I read this chapter, when I read its echo in the life of Jesus, I feel rising up inside of me something I want our master planning team to take with tremendous seriousness. And our whole church, there is a mandate for us and for our future in this chapter that is so significant. And not only that, this chapter, to me, has numerous very personal connections that give it a personal poignancy at this point in my life that I want to share a couple of them with you so that you don't just walk into this chapter cold, saying, well, it's just kind of a chapter on fasting that we plucked out of the Old Testament.

It's so much more than that. This is an appointed chapter for me personally at this point in my ministry. I believe it's an appointed chapter for Bethlehem at this point in our history.

It's an appointed chapter for Jesus Christ, who I believe lived and breathed every word of this chapter, which I'll show you in a minute, in his own ministry. It is a magnificent chapter. It would be worth memorizing.

It's worth a lot more than two weeks. I hope I don't do it injustice by only spending two weeks on it. Let me tell you a couple of relationships that the chapter has.

Some of you have heard of a pastor named Bill Leslie. Bill Leslie was a pastor in Chicago, LaSalle Street Church. He died not too long ago.

Too early, many of us thought, in our way of reckoning. And he came to the Twin Cities. I can't remember when it was, but I remember going to it.

It was quite a while ago. And he spoke at a a turn breakfast, Twin Cities Urban Resourcing Network breakfast, and he told the story of a crisis in his life, an almost breakdown, an almost burnout. Anybody who works in urban ministries a lifetime can tell stories like this.

To save his spiritual life and his ministry, he sought out a mentor to just lay his heart open before them because he was about to break down. He knew he couldn't keep on at the pace he was going under the pressures of the depletion. In urban ministries, everybody takes from you, basically, and very few people give back.

And so he was giving and giving and giving and he was empty and he was about to crack. And so he went to this mentor and as they prayed together, the mentor led him to this chapter. And the two verses, I

remember him describing what happened to him as he meditated and prayed over this chapter a week alone, I think, in a convent somewhere in suburban Chicago.

And he came to verses 10 to 11. I want you to look at them with me just to give you a foretaste. We're going to look at these verses next week, but I want you to feel why this chapter is so significant for us in our urban ministry and in our life together.

And he saw a pattern of ministry here and an insight into dealing with God and people that saved his life, his ministry, his church, and enabled him to keep on. I'll read these two verses with you and you listen as a depleted, broken, burned-out urban pastor or maybe where you are this morning. If you give yourself to the hungry, and he had been, his whole church was built around giving themselves that way, and the question is, how do we do that and where do you get the strength to keep on doing that? And if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in the darkness and your gloom will become like the midday.

So you want a strategy to turn gloom into midday in your life or in your church? Give your life away to the hungry. Pretty simple. There it is.

And the Lord will continually guide you. You need some guidance in your life? Set an agenda of giving your life away. The Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your desire in scorched places like urban Chicago and give strength to your bones and you will be, now here's where it started to click for him, you will be like a watered garden, there's the water coming in and on, and like a spring, that's different, it's more, of water whose waters never fail and that's what he wanted.

That's what I want. I don't want to fail. I don't want to wake up some morning and there's no more water flowing.

Nothing more to give at Bethlehem, nothing more to give to my family, it's dry, it's over. So he saw in this and he found a rhythm, a pattern of being watered, giving himself away, and in that pattern, an ever recurrent refreshment from the inexhaustible fountain of God and he was able to press on until the Lord took him. Here's a second illustration and the second connection that this text has for me and for us as a staff.

It's a connection with Doug Nichols, the president of Action International. He's the guy who called Tom Steller, or did he write you, Tom? He faxed you. He faxed Tom this letter last summer saying, now, what I think Bethlehem should do is go to Northwestern Airlines and ask them to give us a plane and then get 200 of your people and get on the plane and go to Rwanda and bury dead people so doctors and nurses can do what they're called to do and then come back in a few weeks after you've freed up.

Because I learned the situation behind this because he was here and he spoke at our pastor's conference last week, a week ago, and he said, I was sitting there with my, was it his father-in-law, I think, watching the news of Rwanda and there was these dead bodies everywhere, hundreds of them, and the doctors and the nurses were hauling them around and he said, I can do that. Is that a great thing to say? And he did. He did.

He went with Mike Anderson back there, Dr. Mike, and he went over there. Isn't that a great way to, I mean, if that's what happened, I'd believe in television. Well, here he is.

Now, he's called us, he's told us get a plane, take 200 people. We scale it down to what God seems to be calling us to do and we've sent a bunch of people. And then, keep this in mind, April 1983, Doug Nichols gets cancer, discovers cancer, colon cancer.

They go in, take the whole thing out. Now he's got a colostomy here on his side. You know what those are.

They're not easy. And he's watching TV with his radiation treatments and his cancer. They've given him a 70% chance of dying.

It's a 30% chance of living. He said, you mean 70% chance of dying? And he said, yeah, that's what we mean. So he gets his radiation treatment.

He gets his colostomy. He watches TV and he gets on a plane with Mike Anderson. He goes to Rwanda for three weeks and his Jewish oncologist says, you're going to die in Rwanda.

You may not go. He says, that's okay. I'm ready to die.

And his oncologist gets on the phone to his Christian surgeon. He didn't know he's a Christian. He says, you got to stop this guy.

He's going to Rwanda with his colostomy and his radiation. He's going to die in Rwanda. And the Christian surgeon says, well, he's ready.

The Jewish oncologist is very frustrated. So he goes to Rwanda and he calls the Jewish up and says, I'm not dead. He was telling me all this over supper last week.

He's a great storyteller. When we found out as a staff that he was heading for Rwanda with cancer and with his radiation and with his colostomy, we met in this room downstairs. I can remember this.

And the Lord led us to Isaiah 58. I want to read you the verses. The verses are, what verses? Seven and eight.

Referring to the fast that God chooses, he says, is it not, is this fast not to divide your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into the house? When you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh, then when you do that, your light will break out like the dawn and your, and the NASV says recovery. It's literally healing. Your healing will speedily spring forth.

And we bowed our heads as a staff and said, Lord, don't let Rwanda kill him. Let it heal him. Let it heal him.

And when he got back, he got all this tests and the report came back NED, no evidence of disease. Now that doesn't mean he's out of the woods as all you people know who deal with cancer. What he told me was that April this year will be the two year mark.

And they said, if you make it to two years after radiation with no evidence of disease, the likelihood jumps way up that you can finish your three score and 10. He's 53 years old. He's an unusual person.

We'll have him back. I'm sure if God keeps him alive and keeps us alive, we'll have him back. So you can hear him.

You can get the tape, by the way. It was one of the most powerful messages I've ever heard at the pastor's conference. But he wrote me a letter this week to thank me for having him at the conference.

And at the bottom, he put a PS. This is vintage Doug Nichols. PS.

In the last one minute that it possibly took you to read this letter, 28 children died of malnutrition and diseases that could have been easily prevented. 1,667 die every hour. 40,000 children died daily.

Please, John, pray with action for more missionaries to take the gospel to these children. This is a precious chapter. This is a precious, precious and powerful chapter.

Let me just give you a glimpse of how precious it was to Jesus. I personally believe Jesus was saturated with this chapter. I can't prove that, but I'm going to read just some verses.

And you tell me, maybe you're not familiar enough yet with the words of the chapter, but I think I've read you enough that you can hear it. Luke 4, 18, Jesus says, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, to the recovery of sight to the blind, to set those free who are downtrodden.

Matthew 25, 35, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you invited me.

Naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.

And probably most significant of all, we'll look at this next week with more focus. John 7, 38, He who believes in me as the scripture says, now what scripture does he mean? I believe it's Isaiah 58. He who believes in me as the scripture says, from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.

In other words, a trusting relationship with Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah 58. The means to the fulfillment of Isaiah 58. You want to be a watered garden whose spring never fails for your ministry, your family, your broken situation, so that you can just keep giving and giving and giving and giving and giving until you die and go to glory.

If so, he who comes to me, Jesus says, he will or the spirit in him will become a spring of living water that never fails. And next week we'll try to put that together with this chapter. So all of that, just to kind of draw you into this chapter so that you go home maybe this afternoon and tonight and just read it and memorize a few verses and apply it to your life and pray it.

You fasting 40, maybe take this for the last couple of Wednesdays of this month and just pray it onto our church and our life together in this city and help us know how to minister to the brokenness in the suburbs and the brokenness in the urban situation and wherever we find the kind of people that are described here in this chapter. All that by way of introduction. Let me take you for the time we have left, which isn't too much, into the text itself.

Starting at the beginning. God says to Isaiah that he should go and loudly from his throat cry about the sins of his people. The transgressions and sins even though they feel like they're a very religious and righteous people.

There's this veneer and it is an incredible veneer that we'll read about over their sin. Let's read verse 2. Yet they, I'm crying out now about their sin, yet they seek me day by day and delight to know my ways as

a nation, that is, as though they were a nation that has done righteousness and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God, which they have. In other words, they are worshiping, they have found a way to worship to even find some measure of joy and delight in worshiping as though they were an obedient nation when they're not an obedient nation.

They have persuaded themselves that they really want God and it's a terrible delusion. It's a terrible delusion. Now he goes on, end of verse 2. They ask me for just decisions.

They delight in the nearness of God so they know something's wrong because they're asking God for help. We'll see that as we move on. They're saying, show us your righteous and your just decisions on our behalf because something's not right.

And they don't even know what's wrong. They don't even know what the problem is. So God responds now.

Verse 3. Why have we... No, no. God's not responding yet. They're going on and expressing their frustration one more time.

Why have we fasted and thou dost not see? Why have we humbled or afflicted ourselves and thou dost not notice? So they want something to happen. Something's not right and so they're fasting. They're fasting.

They're humbling themselves in fasting and God's not responding and they're frustrated and crying out why and so they're doubly in trouble. They don't know what the problem is and they've got problems they think they know what the problem is and they're fasting to get those solved and it isn't working. It's backfiring.

So let me mention the five things I see now in these couple of verses that they are doing. This religious veneer. Here are the five layers of veneer.

Number one, they are seeking God, verse 2. Number two, they are in some way delighting to know God's ways. Three, they are asking, they are praying for just decisions. Number four, they are delighting in some sense in what they perceive to be the nearness of God.

And number five, they are fasting and humbling themselves to which God says to Isaiah, cry loudly against them because of their sins. That's scary. That's scary.

Here's a fasting that is not pleasing to the Lord. Here's a worship going on and it is a worship that we do not want at Bethlehem. We do not want this worship.

God save us from this worship. But what's wrong with seeking God? What's wrong with delighting to know His ways? What's wrong with asking Him for just decisions? What's wrong with delighting in His nearness? What's wrong with fasting and humbling ourselves before Him? That sounds like the way I worship. That's the way I describe what I do in this service and in my private times.

What's wrong with that? Does that not make you tremble that God can describe worship with such God-centered language and respond to it? Cry against them. Cry against them for their sin. Doesn't that make you want to get so real with God that you would never be surprised by His voice? It's a sham.

It's a sham. It's phony. And you say, I'm fasting.

I'm delighting to know Your ways. Now what's wrong? What's wrong? Jesus gave us a test. Isaiah's giving us a test.

Jesus' test was don't fast to be seen by people. What's Isaiah's test? Verse 3 in the middle. Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire.

So even though they're giving up one desire, they are indulging another somehow. And here's the second thing they're doing. You drive hard all your workers.

Monday morning is the test of Sunday. How you treat your secretary, custodians, your colleagues. Behold, you fast for contention and strife and strike with a wicked fist.

In other words, the upshot of your fasting is you're irritable and you stir up strife. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high. In other words, you don't fast like that.

That is not going to get your voice heard on high when you fast like that. Is it a fast like this which I choose? A day for a man to humble himself? What's wrong with that? Flicked himself? That's what fasting is. Is it for the bowing of one's head like a reed? For spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast? Even an acceptable day to the Lord? So here's the issue.

The issue is on the one side there's a list of religious activities and feelings and on the other side there's a list of ethical, moral, relational realities and these become the test of the authenticity of these. Not our warm fuzzies on Sunday morning. So when I was hearing this great trio sing this morning, with all this in my head, loving their singing, loving this music, I'm saying, God, make my Monday, make my enjoyment of this trio real.

Because tomorrow morning will be the test of whether what I'm experiencing in that chair right there is real. Okay? That's what this text is about. We got another test before us.

Jesus does not play games with worship. He doesn't give a rip about our warm feelings. He doesn't give a rip about our instruments and about the excellence of our performance and about the intensity of our emotions here.

If we are left contentious, harsh, angry on Monday morning, he would just kind of wipe it away. He's not interested. So this is a magnificent and crucial word for us as we move ahead together.

Here are the religious forms. They were humbling or afflicting themselves. No food.

They were bowing the head like a reed. Good posture in worship. Thank you.

And they were spreading out sackcloth and ashes, doing the appropriate outward things. Add those to verses 2 and 3 and the 5 I mentioned there. And yet, here are the ethical things.

They were going after their own pleasure. In some way, they were self-indulgent. They were driving hard their workers.

They were irritable and contentious. They were stirring up strife and they were even getting into fights. It was so bad.

And God says, is that the fast that I choose? Is that the worship form that I choose? And the answer is no. So Jesus gives us a test of authenticity. Are you doing it to be seen by men? And Isaiah gives us a test of authenticity.

Does your fasting leave you Monday morning self-indulgent, harsh toward your employees, irritable and contentious, perhaps at home? Then your fasting is not acceptable to God. It's not what he chooses. God is mercifully warning us in these verses not to substitute religious fervor for righteous living.

Do not substitute religious fervor for righteous living. If you try, you will be religious, but you won't be godly. You won't be pleasing to the Lord.

Now I want you to think about this this week. We're going to come back next week and see the beautiful, magnificent, liberating alternative to this hypocrisy. This is just hypocrisy.

We have going on here, and there is an alternative. There is a church lifestyle. There is a personal lifestyle described in this chapter, which is a magnificent, beautiful alternative to harshness and contention and self-indulgence on Monday morning.

Now don't make a mistake here. You say, oh, well, all the last five weeks are down the tubes. Fasting is of no use.

Don't make a mistake here. Fasting may well be in your life the appointed means of laying hold on God to overcome harshness at work, to overcome irritability and contentiousness at home, to overcome self-indulgence and anger. God may be calling you to fast and fight those things.

What this text is warning is taking that weapon by which you fight those things and making it a cloak of those things so that you just begin to settle in with your Monday style of harshness and irritability and cover it all up on the weekend with some seeking after God and enjoyment of good music and a bowing of your head like a reed and even some fasting, maybe with a fasting 40, and going to Sunday school and talking all the right talk and just beating them up on Monday morning. If that's what the weekend means, God knows. God knows that.

It need not mean that. God can rejoice in worship if he rejoices in our lives on Monday. As we close, be prayer teams here.

I'd like to stand here at the front this morning instead of going to the door and say this. The greatest obstacle to authenticity in worship and in life is unbelief in Jesus. If any of you are here this morning and you haven't even gotten to base one by putting your faith in Jesus Christ who saves, we'd love to talk, pray with you.

If there's something that you're battling with Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday that is making you feel I'm not real on Sunday, we'd like to pray about that with you. God's in the business of liberating his people from those things. So you contemplate whether you'd like to pray with one of the prayer teams or with me as we go.

Let's pray. Lord, we've heard the warning this morning. We haven't seen yet the glorious, beautiful lifestyle alternative that is so light-giving, so refreshing that's going to come in this chapter next week or this afternoon when we meditate and pray over it.

But we've seen enough to know that our consciences are pricked. I tremble, Lord. I tremble as a pastor that my preaching could be the cloak of harshness or contention or anger that would cause you to look upon my ministry and say, John, I'm displeased with it.

I count it for nothing until your life is changed. I tremble, Lord. And I search my own heart.

And I confess my own sin. And I call my brothers and sisters to search their hearts. We want to be real.

We want our preaching to be real and our singing to be real and our praying to be real and our fasting to be real so there's no cloaking of Monday but a freeing of righteousness on Monday. Lord, go with your people now and bless them, I pray, to this end. In Jesus' name, amen.

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