

Prayer, Fasting and the Course of History

by John Piper

Fasting is a powerful tool for seeking God's guidance and direction in our lives and in the life of the church.

Duration: 32:46

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 11:9-10, John 4:24, Acts 13:1-4

Topics: "Corporate Prayer", "Church Unity"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares about the growth and success of a church in bringing new believers to Christ. They attribute this growth to fasting and prayer, which led to a breakthrough in attendance. The speaker also addresses the challenges and tensions within the church, such as differences in worship styles and ministry structures, emphasizing that these issues are not explicitly addressed in the Bible. The sermon concludes with a call to unity and a reminder of the power of fasting and prayer in seeking God's guidance and blessings.

Transcript

The morning text is found in the book of Acts. Acts chapter 13, verse 1 through 4. If you don't have a Bible with you, there's one in the pew pocket in front of you, and it's on page 1312. Acts 13, 1 through 4. Now, they were at Antioch, in a church that was there, prophets and teachers.

Barnabas and Simeon, who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, Ammonian, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul, for the work which I have called them. Then, when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. I'm beginning a series of messages on the biblical practice of fasting. This morning, I expect that it will go all the way through January.

If not farther, though I don't have it all planned out, I've got two weeks planned out, and I'm thinking farther. It's not new for us at Bethlehem. We've taught on fasting before.

We have called the church to fasting during prayer week before. But you know, three weeks ago was it, when we took the one-card survey on Sunday morning, the one where you just checked off three or four things. The most stunning result of that survey was that 40% of the people here that morning had been at

Bethlehem less than three years.

Which means that when I stand up here on a typical Sunday morning, I cannot assume 15 years of history with anybody. I mean, many. And all my teaching on all the things I can remember so clearly from five, six, eight, ten years ago that we ought to know.

There's no reason to think that we ought to know, because we're not the we we were then. I'm really thinking, what does this mean now for my preaching and planning and choosing and all that? Well, fasting, it means that there's little reason for me to think right now that all of you are seasoned practitioners of fasting, or that you have been well taught on biblical fasting, and so I doubt that this is superfluous or redundant in your life. My desire, and I issue now a pastoral call to you, to join me in fasting through the month of January in this way.

I would like you to join with me every Wednesday in skipping breakfast and lunch and spending the time that you might have spent eating, reading your Bible and praying for yourself, your family, this church, the nations, which will in fact be a 24-hour fast unless you happen to eat in the middle of the night. From supper Tuesday to supper Wednesday, we can break the fast here together as we gather to eat. That's a request.

It's not a demand. It's not a thus saith the Lord. It is a call to ask the Lord, would He put it in your heart to do that with us for four Wednesdays in January.

If we come to the end of January and God is still speaking and moving, maybe we'll lengthen it, alter it, but let's do it. Now, I'm designing this morning's message as a kind of rationale, although the whole series will function as a rationale. I want us to pray earnestly that 1995 will be a year of great awakening at Bethlehem, great awakening in the Twin Cities, great awakening in America and around the world, and that the Holy Spirit will fall upon His people with tremendous power to purify and to sanctify and to empower for ministry and for evangelism and for missions and all the ways that might shake America to its foundations and undo some awful things that have been birthed in this nation in the last several hundred years.

You'll understand better why this is a burden to me as we get right into the text. Let's go to it. Saul and Barnabas and the other teachers and prophets are gathered there, and it says in verse 2, they were ministering to the Lord, or you could say worshiping, and fasting.

Verse 2, they're fasting. Now, judging by what the Holy Spirit does at that moment, that morning or afternoon or whenever it was, judging by what He does, I think we can infer that the burden that drove them to fast were questions like this. What's the next move at Antioch, God? What's the next step in the ministry at Antioch? What should we do? What's the meaning of this church? What's the strategic role of Antioch in the kingdom, Lord? I think that's what they were saying in this fast because of what the Holy Spirit then broke in and did and said.

These leaders at the church were so hungry for leadership from God and from the Holy Spirit, so hungry for a breakthrough and an opening of the door and a knocking down of obstacles to ministry that they didn't want to express their desire only with their lips and with their mouth and with their heart, but with their stomachs. That's what fasting is. Fasting is an expression of longing to God with your hunger.

You know, I've been reading a lot on fasting the past several weeks, just getting myself up to speed, seeing what the Bible says, seeing what other people say, seeing what's been happening in church history, and everybody tries to answer why it's a lost art, a lost discipline for the last several hundred years. And answers come like, well, Americans have golden arches on every corner and pizza huts everywhere, and they're not a people who deny themselves, they are a people who satisfy themselves. You know, I don't think that's the reason.

I think the reason is that we don't hunger nearly enough. We settle for McDonald's, we settle for a Vikings game on a Sunday afternoon, we settle for this and that and money and career, and we don't have real spiritual passions. When people have desperate cravings for God, for the salvation of a son, a daughter, a dad, a mom, a transformation of a church in a city, when they're desperate, they fast.

Our longings are not strong. That's why we don't fast. And therefore, my prayer leading up to today is mainly, God, give us desires.

Give these people here passion. Don't let us coast. Don't let us say, oh, Christianity is a feel-good religion and everything is okay in America and everything is okay at Bethlehem and everything is okay in my heart and my family.

If you feel okay, you won't fast, I'll tell you. Fasting is born of desperation and longing for God to break in and change me so that I treat my wife differently and my sons I have more patience with and I have more aggressive boldness in evangelizing my neighbors. And you add yours.

Do you feel desperate for anything? I hope you do in prayer week. You know the thing that boggles my mind about master planning? This was a master planning team, perhaps, in Antioch. You know what boggles my mind about master planning? 99% of the questions that we as a 23-member master planning team have to answer are not answered in the Bible.

That boggles me and it frustrates me. I am a Bible-oriented person. When I see something in the Bible, I get very forceful and very strong.

When I don't see something in the Bible, I get mixed up and confused and indecisive. You ask my wife, none of you believe I'm an indecisive person, right? I don't sound indecisive on Sunday morning. There's a reason for that.

I try to only say what's in the Bible. You catch me in trying to decide where to eat on Valentine's Day and setting a record for about 50% of the times going to closed restaurants. I hate being indecisive, which means I get real frustrated on the master planning team because 90% of the questions we have to answer aren't in the Bible.

Let me just take you back to Antioch. Put yourself on the master planning team of the teachers and prophets in Antioch and here's the questions they were asking. See if you could get an answer for these out of the Bible.

Shall we begin a world mission venture at Antioch? Us. Shall we begin it now rather than next year? Should we send some of our own teachers away or should we get our recruits from Jerusalem where people are called to missions? Should we send Saul or Barnabas or Lucius? Should we send two or should we send three or should we send four or five? Should we send them by land up through Asia or should we send them by sea to Cyprus? Should we send them with full funding or should we say that they

should be people who can earn their own living or should we say that they should expect sons of peace to be in every city where they come to who will meet all their needs? Should we do it ourselves or should we ask the church down in Caesarea to join with us? That's master planning business folks and it ain't in the Bible and it's real hard and churches split over these things. It's not easy.

So what did they do? They fasted. They fasted. They worshiped.

They prayed. Listen, you master planning team members who are here. There's a tremendous pressure on us not to pray.

You feel it? We meet an hour and a half every other week. If everybody gets four minutes to talk, all the time's gone. And people want to talk more than four minutes.

It's over. The pressure on us not to pray and not to worship is absolutely incredible. Which is why churches don't pray.

Pray for the master planning team mainly that we be a worshiping, praying team mainly. I think to pray for an hour and a half is more important than talking. Some of those times anyway.

But I feel, I walk in there and I just feel everybody got something to say. I got ten things to say. We got issues to talk about.

And prayer feels very, very inefficient. So we try to meet 30 minutes early. Pray for us.

I'm scared, frankly. I want to say with Moses, unless you go up with us, we will not go from here. Unless you break out and say what you said there, the Holy Spirit spoke to them and said, take Saul and Barnabas and send them away.

What are the sendings at Bethlehem? What are the sendings in worship style? What are the sendings in ministry focus? What are the sendings in tensions between urban and suburban issues? What are the sendings in how we structure and do ministry here? It's not in the Bible. Contemporary worship songs versus hymns. Organs versus pianos.

That's not in the Bible. You can't get real uppity about that. You can't.

It's just not there. We just have to ask God, who are we? What should we do at this little point, in this little place, at this stage in history? And if he doesn't speak, disunity everywhere. That's our only hope, is to do what they did here.

You catch on to why I'm calling us to fast in this month? Let me make four observations about this text. Number one, the fasting was after Christ's coming. That's obvious.

The fasting was after Christ's coming. Now, the reason I say that is, I know that there's some people who are going to say, oh, I think fasting is an Old Testament discipline that doesn't have any place in New Covenant spirituality. It's part of the old wineskins, should be thrown away.

Well, if it's part of the old wineskins that should be thrown away after the coming of Jesus, then Paul and Saul and the other teachers here were doing something wrong or old. Well, I don't think they were doing something wrong, and I don't think they were doing something old in a wrong way. Next Sunday's message is going to tackle that head on.

Is fasting part of the old wineskins? Because that comes straight out of Matthew 9, 16 to 18, where Jesus says, when the bridegroom is gone, they will fast and immediately goes into the old wineskins thing and many interpreters say the old wineskins is fasting. You can't put new wine in old wineskins. So get rid of the old wineskins, take the new wine, put it in something else, maybe freedom, no fasting, eating, maybe feasting.

Let's feast instead of fast. Is that the right response? That's next Sunday's sermon. So my answer in advance is, they didn't do wrong here.

And in fact, Luke, who wrote this, means for us to learn something from it about hearing the voice of God. Number two observation. They did it as a group.

Now the reason that's important to observe is because Jesus said, when you fast, comb your hair, wash your face and don't look glum. And your father who sees in secret will reward you. Which just primes me to be afraid of public fasting.

To be afraid of all of you knowing that I mean this and I'm going to join you in this and you knowing when each other do it, and your family knows that when you come to the table and have a sip of water. What's daddy doing? Oh, he's fasting. That's right.

Is it okay to know that? These people evidently thought group fasting was okay. The whole Old Testament thought group fasting was okay. The whole history of the church thinks group fasting is okay.

The reason is simple. When Jesus said to fast that way, the meaning was not that it's a sin to be seen fasting, but it's a sin to want to be seen fasting and be applauded. Oh, he's so spiritual.

Oh, he's got such self-control. If you want that, you can fast in secret or in public and you're a goner. You can have bad motives fasting in secret.

So the secret public thing won't solve the problem. It's easier to fast in secret with pure motives. It's harder to fast in public with pure motives, but we're called at times to fast together.

And so they did it as a group. We can do it as a group. Third observation.

This fasting proved to be an occasion for the Holy Spirit's special guidance. I want to read that with you because that's the key. That's what I'm after.

And while they were ministering to the Lord, this is verse 2, and fasting, fasting, underline, while they were ministering, worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I've called them. Then when they had fasted, they didn't stop. When they heard the voice of the Lord saying, set those two aside, they fasted again.

They had some more information they needed, like where are they going to go? And how are they going to go? And when are they going to go? And they fasted again, prayed and laid their hands on them and he sent them away. Now, I believe that Luke, who wrote this this way, means for us to infer that because they fasted and worshiped and prayed, God spoke. There's a connection.

There's a connection. We don't have to understand the whole reasoning behind why the Holy Spirit would wait until a church humbles itself with the hunger of fasting before he moves. But that's what this text said.

He did. And he may do that here. Without evidence to the contrary, I believe Luke is teaching us that God loves to be sought for extraordinary guidance at key times in the history of churches through fasting.

Final observation, number four. This fasting changed the course of history. It is almost impossible.

This gets me so excited about our year coming up. It is almost impossible to overstate the historical importance of what happened here. Just think about it.

They fasted and prayed. Now, up to this time, there had been no, as far as we know, no organized missionary thrust beyond that little eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Nor had Paul been on any missionary journey that direction toward the Roman Empire and its bigness that way.

And 13 of our 27 New Testament books were unwritten and would not have been written without this prayer meeting because every one of Paul's letters were written in response to churches planted on these missionary journeys that were born in this prayer meeting. It's an awesome thing. Within two and a half centuries, the whole empire was Christian, nominally at least.

Today, 1.3 billion people name Jesus Christ, at least nominally, because of this prayer meeting. Every country in the world today has a Christian presence in it because of the mission that was born into Asia and Greece and Rome and Spain and Britain through this prayer meeting. I mean, if you let yourself feel how some meetings and fastings can become so strategic in the history of the world, could not 1995, could not January of 1995 at Bethlehem, for us, be that strategic in our 2000 by 2000 venture or in our urban ministries and our suburban ministries and our ministries downtown and our ministries at the university and our ministries overseas.

Fasting has a role to play here. I got in the mail this week, as many of you did, the Kazakh team update. The book of Acts is being written all over again through Brian and Deanna Pratt and others over there.

And I want to just read you something because I just read this yesterday. I said, there it is again. I'll probably butcher these Russian name, Kazakh names, so forgive me those who know how to pronounce.

We know from 2 Timothy 2.2 how the good news spread from Paul to Timothy and to faithful men and to others. In 1993, a Russian man in our fellowship named Velodya gave a New Testament to a young Kazakh named Yurkinbek. He read it and received Christ.

Generation two. He sought, he soon brought his brother, Aitkali, to Christ. Aitkali brought Bakitbek, a co-worker, along with literally scores of others.

God has given him the gift of evangelism. Bakitbek brought his sister Kunai, who in turn brought a number of fellow students at a technical institute. So we have seen at least six generations of new believers in 18 months.

Recently, we saw a large increase in attendance and wondered why. Then we remembered that we had fasted and prayed for three days. Brian and Deanna were sent during the crash and burn year, folks.

And they are seeing amazing fruit. Praise God for what they're seeing. Pray for them.

The opposition is mounting there, even on national television. They prayed and fasted, and there was the breakthrough. What might happen? What might happen? It's happened past.

It'll happen again. Let me just give you a couple other illustrations, because these are the sorts of things that make you say, yes. In 2 Chronicles 20, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Meunites were arrayed, this massive horde of violent nations against little Judah and Jehoshaphat.

What would you do if you were a king with three massive nations surrounding you? No human way out at all. What would you do? Verse three, Jehoshaphat was afraid, natural, and turned his attention to seek the Lord, less natural, and proclaimed a fast, perhaps the least natural of all, throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord.

They even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord. So there was a great nationwide fast. And what did they say? God, save us, give us a breakthrough, give us a way out, show us a way forward.

Is there any future for Judah? Verses 14 and 15, the next day, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jehoshaphat, this is the same day, and he said, this is exactly what happened in Acts 13, the Spirit of the Lord said, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jehoshaphat, and he said, listen, all Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat, thus says the Lord to you, do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's. And the next day, they opened the door, and they were dead. They had killed each other.

The Moabites and the Ammonites killed each other. It took them three days to gather the spoil. Now picture this, folks, in relation to our church and your life and any other burden you face.

They're in an absolutely hopeless situation. There is no future. And overnight, God turns it into incredible blessing, incredible blessing.

The threat became the blessing. Three days it took them to gather the spoil. They fasted.

They fasted. 1756, John Wesley, in his journal, The King of Britain, Desperate. The French are threatening an attack and an invasion.

Wesley wrote, the fast day was glorious. They called it a nationwide fast. The fast day was glorious, such as London has scarce seen since the restoration.

Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquility. Footnote, later inserted, humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French and the French.

Now you can multiply story after story. I'll be telling you more stories right on through January of the ways God today and in history has used fasting to implement his great history changing purposes. But let me try to just bring this to a close by asking what's going on today at Bethlehem and why right now in this way am I calling for fasting.

I am open to this by the way. If any of you prophets in our midst need encouragement, this should be it. One of you came to me and said, last night I was praying and I felt very strongly that the Lord encouraged me to come to you and just ask you to seriously consider whether we as a church shouldn't fast a day a week.

I don't know for sure if it's of the Lord. But I believe it is. I just present it to you, pastor.

You test it with the staff and the elders in your own heart and see. Well, I had just been invited three weeks before that to go to Orlando by Bill Bright with 600 others to fast for two days. And I went.

Remember that? December 5 and 7. When I got there, I had in my mind this person's asking that I consider that for our church. And I was going seeking the Lord's wisdom on this. The second person to stand up that night was from Promise Keepers in Orlando.

And he said, the reason I came is because we at Promise Keepers believe God is calling us to call the men to fast one day a week on Wednesday. I got home and Bob Hamlet gave me this Promise Keepers magazine which on the back shows how Promise Keepers was born in fasting. It says here, in 1990, Coach McCartney asked 72 men to commit to pray and fast through lunch every Wednesday.

That's exactly what I'm calling you to do. From breakfast and lunch on Wednesday. Through lunch on Wednesday.

Praying specifically that almighty God would stir the hearts of men to pursue Jesus Christ. You wonder where Promise Keepers came from? Promise Keepers is the most phenomenal thing that's happening in America today almost. At least visibly.

280,000 men gathered just to worship God. Where'd it come from? It came from fasting. And then it finishes, the board, leadership team and many of the staff are recommitted to this end and we invite you to join us.

To which I say, I join you. I don't feel like I've got to do my thing at Bethlehem or we have to do our little thing. I just say, we'll join you.

We'll join you, Bill Bright. Bill Bright is praying, he finished a 40 day fast last summer and God gave him this burden. He's going to call for two million North Americans to fast for 40 days in the next five years.

That's his goal. And then to seek to build fasting back into the life of the churches. And here was the most compelling thing exegetically that he said.

He said, notice that in Acts 13, 1 to 3 there are three things. Worship, prayer and fasting. Isn't it remarkable that in the last 25 years there has been a stunning awakening in worship.

Nothing like we've seen for centuries in America with the awakening of contemporary worship music and churches coming alive and fire being born. All kinds of people writing and talking about worship and churches meeting God in fresh, engaging ways. And then he pointed out the prayer movement is phenomenal.

The Minnesota Prayer Coalition is without precedent in the history of this state gathering together all the prayer movements and all the denominational prayer ministries and all over the country the concerts of prayer that are happening and around the world prayer mountains in Korea. We'll talk about Korea next week and in the weeks to come. Prayer has experienced an incredible awakening and rebirth in the last 25 years.

And then he said do you see that in fasting? It's not there. Worship, prayer, and fasting. God has touched this land and the world in worship.

God has touched this land and the world in prayer. God is, Bill Bright prays, and I pray is now going to touch the world with fasting. Do you want to be a part of that? I'm not a prophet.

I just believe that it may be that the three prongs of the stool of Acts 13 worship, prayer, and fasting might be what God wants to rest His awakening on. Could it be in God's sovereignty that He's saying I'm moving. I'm moving mightily in this world.

I'm moving in South Korea. I'm moving in Kazakhstan. I'm moving in Indonesia.

I'm moving in Sub-Saharan Africa. I'm moving in the prayer movements and the worship movements of this land, but I have a movement yet that you haven't seen at Bethlehem. God knows we haven't seen it at Bethlehem, and it will come when the third leg of the stool is in place, and you are hungry enough for me to hunger not just with your mouth and your mind and your heart, but with your appetite.

Join me in that kind of hunger. Pray with us this week in the commons. Read a book on fasting and ask the Lord this afternoon before Wednesday comes, should I be part of that Lord and skip breakfast and lunch on Wednesday and spend time with you? Oh, Lord God, move.

We need you so much at our church. I need you in my life. I don't feel nearly as fruitful as I want to be.

We're not winning people to Christ with the kind of fruitfulness that I long to see, and that was typical in the book of Acts. There are many heart conditions in this church that need reviving transformation. Our city and our nation is a fractured, broken, degenerate society.

You have been forsaken. You have been neglected, snubbed, and defiled in so many ways that you have any future for us at all is mercy, all mercy. And we want to join together as a church with Bill Bright, with the Promise Keepers, and I'm sure with thousands of other churches that this month call for a day of fasting each week that we might call upon you as we never have before.

Come, give your people your mind about this, I pray, and put a spirit of prayer and fasting in our hearts. And all the people said, Amen.

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