

A Theology of Fasting

by Tim Conway

Fasting is a way to seek the Lord and experience spiritual benefits, but it should be done for the right reasons and with the right motive.

Duration: 56:34

Scripture: Ezra 4:24, Haggai 1:1, Zechariah 7:5-6, Matthew 6:16-18, Mark 9:29, Acts 13:2-3, Acts 14:23

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Heart Condition"

Description

This sermon delves into the importance of fasting as an act of worship and seeking the Lord with a desperate heart. It emphasizes that fasting should be done with the right motives, not as a ritual or tradition, but out of a genuine desire for God. The sermon highlights the need to focus on the heart's condition and the true purpose of fasting, which is to draw near to God and seek Him diligently.

Transcript

Our church is designating this week as just a week where we're going to give ourselves to seeking the Lord in a special way. Often times we call it a week of prayer and fasting. Not that everybody in the whole church fasts for an entire eight days, but during that time what we want to do is encourage the folks in the church to fast meals, days, and often times when I'm encouraging the church and others, we're encouraging the church to give ourselves to this.

Inevitably somebody asks, you asked right? Inevitably, somebody asks, what about fasting? How often? We set aside these weeks to vary specially. This is not useless at all. I mean laying hold on the Lord like this is not.

He's heard our prayers again and again and again. We do this not out of ritual, not out of just tradition, we do this because we lay hold upon the Lord in a special way and the Lord answers. The Lord has blessed us with so many answers to our prayers through the years.

He is a God who hears prayer and He has vindicated Himself as that kind of God repeatedly. We talk about fasting and I get questions on pretty much a quarterly basis. Every three months we try to set aside a week where we give ourselves to some very special praying, fasting, seeking the Lord.

And when I use the term fast, questions come up. What is it? What do we fast from? How often? Are you talking about fasting for an entire week? What are you talking about here? How often? What should be the

frequency? And so what I thought I would do tonight is, I think this is a very healthy study, it's just by way of remembrance. What I want us to do is just do a topical study tonight on this theme of fasting.

Let's look at what Scripture says. So what I want you to do is go out of here with a good feeling of what it's all about. You're trying to think about, well how often should I do it? And by the way, just because we call special fasting weeks, doesn't mean that Christians can't fast all the time.

They can't fast on a regular basis. There's certainly nothing that governs. And it's not like it's mandatory and legalistically we're forcing everybody to do this.

If somebody didn't fast during our week of prayer and fasting, certainly there's no crime in that. But we just want to encourage it for the sake of unity. Have the church really beseeching the Lord in a special way all at one time? When you go out of here today, I'd really want you to have a feel for this, maybe more than you had when you come in, just as to what's the significance of it? And how often should we do it? And if the church calls a time of special prayer and fasting, I mean should I fast for a meal? Should I fast for a day? Should I try to fast for three consecutive days? Or seven consecutive days? What is this? For one, when we talk about fasting, you know what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about abstaining from food as prescribed in our Bibles. And I know that people who don't hold to the Bible fast. People fast for health reasons.

People in other religions fast. And I'm not talking about fasting just in a generic way. I'm talking about fasting as it's found in Scripture.

I'm talking about God-prescribed fasting. What does it look like? So let's look. You know in the New Testament, it's not like there's huge amounts of verses that we can go to.

There's a couple handfuls. So let's look at them. Look at Matthew 4, verse 2. What I want to do is I want to just go through a number of these verses from the New Testament and just see what we can glean from them.

Just in a casual reading to try to put together. The purpose for this is a theology of fasting. That's what we could call the message tonight.

A theology of fasting. What does God teach us? What is the teaching of God on fasting? So Matthew 4, verse 2. After I get done with these New Testament passages, I want to look at one in the Old Testament, which I think is very helpful. Matthew 4, verse 2. Jesus.

We know that our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for how long? Forty days. Now look, as I was saying on Sunday, you do not want to say, well, He was God or He is God. He is God.

I'm not denying the deity of Christ, but I'm saying Jesus Christ fasting and His hunger was the fasting and the hunger of a human being. God becoming flesh. God taking upon Himself, robing Himself with mankind in a way, in a manner, in which He is like us in every respect save sin.

What I mean by that is His hunger was just as real as yours, and when He fasted, His fasting affected Him just like yours does. You know where I'm going with that? It's possible for you to fast for 40 days and not die. You know, if you're not accustomed to fasting, you may think one day and you're ready to die.

You may think about, you know, you miss breakfast and get about to 3 o'clock in the afternoon missing lunch and you're ready to die. There are people that feel that way. You just feel like, I can't do this.

Jesus Christ fasted for 40 days. I have a pastor friend who last... Well, you know what? I know two pastors that just in the last year did 40-day fasts. You can fast for 40 days.

So if you're wanting to know, well, you know, how long is it even safe? Now, I'm not saying go without water for 40 days. We'll have another casket up here if you do that. But you know, you can go 40 days on water.

You can. You can go 40 days on juice. So my point here is, our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for 40 days as a man, as one made like us in every respect.

Just point that out. And by the way, our Lord was given to fasting. I mean, He did it.

It was something that was part of His life. At least here. At least when He was being tempted by the devil, we see that He fasted.

Now, let's go to Matthew 6. Matthew 6 has one of the most important texts on fasting in our Bible. Because it is where our Lord Jesus Christ is one of the two passages, or one of the two incidents where our Lord gives us instruction, very specific instruction on fasting. And of course, these different accounts can be found in the different Synoptic Gospels.

But we basically have two accounts. We have His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount here in Matthew 6. And then we have that occasion where the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees came and they asked Him, you know, why do we fast? Or the disciples of John and the Pharisees fast and your disciples don't fast. These two passages are Jesus' instruction in the New Testament on fasting.

I mean, if you want to study the most important passages on this topic, these are the ones you want to look at. He teaches us some very valuable things here. Matthew 6.16 This has often been said, when you fast, and when you fast, verse 16, when you fast.

There's an assumption in the way He says that. When you fast. When the Lord Jesus Christ looks at us as His followers, and He says, when you fast, this is the way I want you to do it.

He's definitely implying that He believes that as followers of His, this is something that is going to be characteristic of our lives. When you fast doesn't mean you won't fast. When you fast does not mean that this is going to be something that as a Christian, that should be foreign to you.

When you fast means, I believe that my followers are going to fast. In fact, His instruction as given to these disciples of John and these disciples of the Pharisees, who come to Him and ask Him, we're going to get to that text in a few minutes. He says, He says, they don't fast now because I'm here.

I'm with them. But when I go, they will fast. Jesus is saying, my followers are going to fast.

He's not speaking specifically to His followers there, although indirectly He does. But here He is, directly to us. He's looking at His disciples, and you remember, He gathered the Sermon on the Mount.

He especially called out His disciples there, and He began to teach them. There were crowds behind there. He had kind of the inner group there.

And He would say this to us, when you fast. This is part of the Christian life. Do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.

Okay, He doesn't want us fasting in a hypocritical manner. In other words, He doesn't want us appearing to be something that we're not. He doesn't want us fasting just to be seen by men.

He says, they disfigure their faces, and their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. What's their reward? Well, their reward is that they want to be seen by men, and they get what they want.

They get seen by men. They got what they wanted. They didn't want anything more than that.

They fasted to be seen by men. They got seen by men, and everything's good. They got what they wanted.

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face. In other words, this doesn't mean that nobody else can ever know that you're fasting. If they do, if they find out, then all of a sudden, all your fasting's negated.

That's not what this means. If you're married, and your wife is cooking meals for you, you probably want to... You know, there's times you need to communicate to people that you're fasting. I don't believe for us to have a week of prayer and fasting where we kind of know that there's a lot of the one and others in the church that are doing this.

That's not what this is about. It's got to do with motive here. It's got to do with whether you're doing it to be seen.

Motive is the issue here. They do it for a motive. They have a reason.

The hypocrite wants to appear to be something. You don't need to flaunt it. You try to cover it up.

Look, when you fast, try to cover it up as much as possible. But you're going to get into situations where you may have to tell somebody, or you may have to make it apparent that you're doing that. When you fast, anoint your head, wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret.

In other words, the reason that we're fasting has to do with our Father who sees in secret. You see, when I fast, when you fast, Jesus is assuming we'll fast. It's part of the Christian life.

And what He's pointing out here is, you do this in a way not for the sake of men, not for them seeing you. You do it because it's got something to do with God the Father. In other words, when you fast, there are implications that have to do with your relationship with the Father.

You keep reading here. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Now there's a textual issue here.

Some translations actually add openly, or in the open, for everyone to see. It's a textual issue. Whether it's there or not, it doesn't take away from the fact God's going to reward you.

In other words, we fast because there is a fatherly reward in fasting. There are benefits. I want you to see that.

There are spiritual... Jesus is saying there is a spiritual benefit to fasting. You need to see that. It's not a vain exercise.

It's not like, oh, fasting. Well, that's neat. You know, we tack it on our life.

Not like the hypocrites. You remember how Jesus tells a story about the tax collector and the Pharisee that go to the temple to pray? You remember that story? Luke 18? And what does Jesus say about the Pharisee? Well, he began to pray. God, I thank You, I'm not like other people, and I'm not like this, and I'm not like that tax collector over there, and I fast twice in the week.

Let me tell you this. All fasting is not profitable, but there is fasting that's profitable. That's plain from Scripture.

There is fasting that doesn't do you any good. There's the hypocrites here in Matthew 6. All they get is seen by others. And that's the end of what they get.

But He's promising that if you're fasting... And you know what's not explicitly said, but is definitely implied through here? Faith. Because you're doing this in secret, which means you believe that God... Remember how it says over in Hebrews 11, we must believe that God is and He's a rewarder. That's what we have here.

The Father rewarding. He's a rewarder of them that seek Him diligently. You know what fasting is? It's one of the things that God has given to us.

One of the methods God has given to us of seeking Him. It's turning away from the physical appetites and seeking the Lord in special ways. Turning away from gratifying that physical appetite and seeking the Lord in a very special way.

That's what this is for. Seeking the Lord. Faith.

You do this in secret. You do this when nobody's watching, because you know God is watching. You know the Father is watching.

You know He is there in secret. And you're fasting because you're wanting to lay hold on Him. You want to seek Him.

Let's jump to Matthew 9 now, in the other account that I was telling you about, where you get the disciples. Matthew tells us it's just disciples of John. The three synoptics kind of present the people that are asking from different perspectives.

But in Matthew 9.14, the disciples of John, this is John the Baptist, they come to Him saying, why do we and the Pharisees fast? But your disciples do not fast. I guarantee. It's not a good thing to be in one of the first two groups.

You know what? It was okay to be a disciple of John at first, but you didn't want to stay a disciple of John. You wanted to make that transition over to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Why? These guys are out of touch.

These guys are out of touch with what's happening in this world. What's truly happening. They're out of touch with the significance of Christ.

The fact the Messiah has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. They're out of touch with that.

Why? Because fasting, as Jesus teaches us right here, has everything to do with Him. Notice, Jesus said to them in verse 15, can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. Now, here's what I want you to see.

Do you see the word mourn when the wedding guests, or can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? You all see that. Matthew, mourn. Now, this exact account in Mark 2, you don't have to turn over there, but you know it doesn't use mourn there.

You know what word it uses? You know what word Mark uses? Fast. He said, Mark uses the word fast. Let me just read the Mark account.

Mark 2:18-20 Now, John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, and people came and said to him, why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast? But your disciples do not fast. 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's account is actually a more extensive, more detailed account than what Matthew gives us. And what's very interesting is this. Matthew uses the word mourn in exactly the same place where Mark uses the word fast.

Interchangeably. That means they're synonymous. I hope that helps in thinking about what fasting is.

It's mourning. Why do we mourn? Why would you mourn when the bridegroom is taken away? Because there's longings there. There's desire there.

I want Christ back. I want to be with... This isn't good. I don't like this.

And you know what? We should not be content. This is a healthy discontent. You should not be content to live by faith.

You say, what? The Bible says we should live by faith. No, what I mean is you should not be content to stay here and live by faith forever. You should want to see Him face to face.

You should want to embrace God. You should want to see Him. You should want to stand in His presence.

You should want to walk with Him and talk with Him and fellowship with Him forever. This isn't any good. Well, it's kind of good.

It's good if you're a Christian and you're walking with the Lord here, but even the most that Christians experience here is not what we want. We want consummation. This is like we've been betrothed.

We don't want betrothed. I mean, who gets engaged and wants to stay engaged forever? That's what we're dealing with here. We don't want this.

We don't want to walk by faith, not by sight for eternity. We want to walk by sight. We want to see Him.

It doesn't mean we don't trust Him, but we want to see Him. We want to be with Him. We want the veil ripped back.

And until that happens, we're longing after something. We want more. I want Him to manifest Himself more.

I want more of His presence, more of His power, more of His help. I want more. Don't you want more? I mean, that seems to be what this is all about.

They can't fast while I'm here. Why? They've got the bridegroom. Look, this isn't just random or sporadic exercise of the Christian.

This has to do with what we desire. That's what I want the church doing. I want the church to fast several times a year at least.

I hope you're fasting outside of the times when the church calls for a church fast. But I don't want people to do it mechanically or just because we've got into the tradition of starting the year with a week of prayer and fasting. This has to come from desire.

This has to come from unfulfilled desire, unfulfilled passion, unfulfilled longing. That's what he's talking about here. Let's go further with this.

How about Luke 2.36. We're going to get closer to the heart of this. I think we're already hitting on it. But I hope this will help bring it into even greater clarity.

Luke 2.36 You may remember there was a prophetess named Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin. And then as a widow until she was 84.

She did not depart from the temple. Notice this. Worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.

Now here's what I want you to see. Look, our lives are to be lived for the glory of God. Whatsoever we do, whether we eat or drink, or don't eat and drink, we are to do everything for the glory of God.

This is about worship. Worship comes from the old English, worth Skype. It has to do with the worthiness of something.

Worship is when we are recognizing the worth of something. There is nobody more worthy than God Almighty. There is nothing more worthy.

He alone is worthy of our worship. And she, Anna, was worshiping with fasting. You see, fasting is a form of worship.

Why? Because when the bridegroom is taken away, think about this. When I fast because of the reason given in Matthew 6, because I long for the Father's reward. When I fast because the bridegroom has been taken away and my longing is for Him.

When I need God, when I need what God can give me, when I need God Himself, when I'm longing for that, that's worship. Look, when we're needy people, and we're coming to God and we're desperate, and we need His help, but more than that, more than what He can give us, we need Him. We want Him.

That's worship. Isn't it? I mean, isn't that the heart and soul of worship? When we're wanting God more than anything else. When I say, you know what? I want God.

I will give up food for these seasons in my life because I really want Him. I want Him more than food. I need food.

I get hungry. But I have a hunger in my soul for Him. And you see, that is worship.

And again, the last New Testament verse I would take us to is, well, actually there's two. They're found in Acts. The early church, we see them fasting.

Acts chapter 13. Acts chapter 13 is the chapter in Scripture where we see the missionary endeavor taking root and form. Paul and Barnabas are sent out of the church of Antioch.

Paul's first missionary journey. Acts chapter 13 verse 1, now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers. Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Mana'an, a lifelong friend of Herod, the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, now we know that with Antioch it was worshiping with fasting. Here the ESV anyways says, Worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Now, were they fasting just as a typical practice and that's when the Spirit came? Or did the Spirit somehow move through a prophet or somehow indicate these men needed to go to the mission field and they saw this as being such an important event that they needed to fast? I mean, I don't know the exact order here. It almost seems like, if you take it at face value, it seems like they were fasting, the Spirit in the midst of their fasting indicated maybe through a New Testament prophet that these were the two guys that were to be sent and they continued in their praying and fasting. But anyways, the praying and fasting seems to go hand in hand with the sending out of the first missionaries that are going to go out and actually cross from Asia over into Europe and we know all the churches that would be established.

This is a major matter. This missionary movement is flowing out of this praying and fasting. We go a little further in the book of Acts, Acts 14.23. Now Paul and Barnabas, they're moving around through the churches and they're coming back to churches that they've already established.

Churches that were already planted. Acts 14.23, when they appointed elders for them in every church. And now they're going back to these churches that they originally planted.

Now they're going back to them. These churches are springing up and they're appointing elders and they're doing this with prayer and fasting. It's like when Paul and Barnabas are designated from the church at Antioch to go out, when Paul and Barnabas themselves go into these churches and elders are being appointed, it is being done with prayer and fasting.

Why? Because there's this desperate need then. I mean, you want to be right about the leaders that you're choosing to take the Gospel out on missionary endeavors. And who's going to be overseeing the churches? This is a time of desperation.

Lord, we need answers from You. We need Your help. We need clarity.

We need discernment. You can just see it's times of great need. They commit themselves to prayer and fasting.

Okay, those are the verses in the New Testament where you find fasting come up. I think you get a feel for what it's about. Now, I want to take you to an Old Testament passage just in the remaining 25 minutes or so.

This is a great passage. Turn in your Bibles first to Ezra 4. You kind of have to build the setting here before we can just dive right into it. If you don't get a feel for the setting, you kind of lose some of this.

So if you go to Ezra, let me just tell you, if you want to do a real interesting study, very carefully study Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. Haggai and Zechariah are the two prophets that God sent into Jerusalem in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. And those four books, they're all from the same time period.

It's that time period of the rebuilding of the temple after the Babylonian captivity. They all go together. Two of them are side-by-side in the minor prophets, and two of them are side-by-side right before the book of Job and Psalms and that area of your Bible.

But they go together. It's very interesting if you start looking at the timetables. And often they measured the time by whoever was in the leadership, whether that was Cyrus or Darius.

And they talk about, if you go back before that, it was Nebuchadnezzar in a certain year of Nebuchadnezzar. Anyway, let's look at this. Ezra 4.24. Actually, glance back up to Ezra 4.4 since you're right in the same chapter.

I want you to see this. What happens in Ezra 4.4? What do you see happen there? Fear. Let me tell you what happened.

Seventy years of Babylonian captivity go by. Seventy years. Which prophet prophesied they'd be in Babylon 70 years? Jeremiah.

Daniel picked up on that. Daniel prayed right there towards the end. What happens? Cyrus comes along and Cyrus says, Hey, any Jews that want to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild? Go back.

So they go back. And first thing they did? They built the altar. That was the first thing they did.

Second thing they did was they laid the foundation for the temple. In 4.4, they quit work on the temple after they had the foundation laid out of fear. Because the people around out there, listen, even though they had a commission to do this, the capital was a long way away.

And by the time they get to this point, Cyrus isn't even there anymore. And what they get is people that didn't like the Jews. Anti-Semitism was very much alive back then.

They didn't want these Jews rebuilding the walls or rebuilding the temple. They didn't want that. They were opposed to it.

They tried various ways to stop them, scare them, and they managed. They scared them. They got the foundation completed, and then they terrified them.

And the Jews quit. And now what I want you to do is I want you to jump down to Ezra 4.24. Then the work of the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped. They got the foundation done and it stopped.

And notice this, it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. I made the comment Cyrus was gone. Well, he's gone by the time this work would resume.

It would resume in the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. Now what I want you to do is jump over to Haggai. Haggai and Zechariah.

We want to look at those two momentarily. They're right at the end of the Old Testament in the Minor Prophets. Haggai is very short.

Zechariah is a bit longer. But remember that. The work would not resume until the second year of this reign of Darius.

So now if we go to Haggai, y'all there? Everyone got it? Old Testament, last book is Malachi. Jump back before that, you've got Zechariah. Back before that, you've got Haggai.

Little tiny book. Notice how it starts. Haggai 1.1. Remember, back in Ezra, we saw that the work on the house of God ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

Now, Haggai picks up in the second year of Darius the king. This is the precise year that the building is going to resume. The second year of Darius the king.

Now jump over to Zechariah 1.1, which is the next book in your Bibles. Zechariah 1.1. And you're going to see, it starts in the eighth month in the second year of Darius. Again, it's the same.

It's the same. That text that we had there in Ezra 4.24, that the building would resume, is the exact same year that both of these books start. Why? Well, I'll tell you what happened.

They quit out of fear. And God sent both these prophets in the very year that they would resume to kickstart these people into resuming the building. They were wrong to quit.

They weren't trusting the Lord. They were living in fear. And if you go back and read Ezra, what you find is God sent Haggai and Zechariah to them.

These are the prophets that were sent to them to kick them in the rear and get them building again. God was not happy that they stopped building. Now, let's just keep moving along here.

By chapter 7. Go to Zechariah chapter 7. Zechariah chapter 7 starts, verse 1, starts in the fourth year of King Darius. Now, I'm just going to tell you this. In Ezra, we find out that the temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius.

Guess what? Zechariah 7 starts in the fourth year. Well, the construction was kicked back into gear in the second year. We know that it's finished in the sixth year.

Guess where the fourth year puts you? Right dead in the middle of the reconstruction of the new temple. We're going somewhere with this. Just hang with me here.

You've got to picture yourself. This is Jerusalem. They've been in fear of their enemies.

They quit. After the foundation was laid, they quit. God was not pleased.

God sent these prophets. Told them, you need to start rebuilding. You need to trust Me.

Don't you recognize that your food, what you've tried to do has not been blessed because you have not given first priority to the rebuilding of My temple. That's what He told them through these prophets. And so they resumed building.

In the second year of Darius, they finished it in the sixth year. Zechariah 7 is in the fourth year. It's when the temple is halfway restored.

That's key. Now, look at Zechariah 7 verse 2. Now, the people of Bethel. Bethel was 11 miles north of Jerusalem.

There were Jews there as well. Jews that came back, they didn't all go to Jerusalem. Many of them went to wherever their families came from.

Not all of them went to Jerusalem. Many of them were in the surrounding cities. And so you've got a bunch of Jews in Bethel, 11 miles north of Jerusalem.

And they sent Cherezer and Regimelech, interesting, these are still like Babylonian names on these Jews, and their men to entreat the favor of the Lord. In other words, they're sending an entourage from Bethel, 11 miles to Jerusalem. Why? Check this out.

Verse 3, saying to the priests of the house of the Lord. You see, they sent them to where the priests were and where the house of the Lord was, which at this time is halfway rebuilt. And the prophets.

We know who the prophets are. You can see that in Ezra. That's these two guys, Haggai and Zechariah.

Notice what they say, should I weep and abstain? Abstain, what's that? That's fasting. If you doubt it, we'll do a few verses. He tells us that's exactly what it means.

Abstain from food. Should we weep? Doesn't that go hand in hand with mourning? Like we saw in the New Testament, where mourn and fasting are used interchangeably. They're talking about weeping and abstaining.

Yeah, it goes hand in hand. I was leading you back to fasting. Should I weep and abstain or fast in the fifth month as I have done for so many years? Now, the so many years is 70 years, and again, he's going to tell us that precisely in verse 5. God's going to tell us.

And what are the 70 years? The 70 years are when they were in captivity. What they're saying is this, they sent these two select men with their entourage 11 miles to Jerusalem, to the priests and to the prophets, and they're saying, hey guys, go ask the priests and the prophets whether we're supposed to continue to fast in the fifth month like we have been for 70 years. Why would they have done that? To express their mourning for the fact that Nebuchadnezzar came in and wiped out the temple and burned it and it was destroyed.

That's basically what's going on here. Fifth month of the year, these people have been fasting for 70 years. They have a question as to whether they should continue.

And here's the thing, the temple's being rebuilt. It's like, well, we want to know, should we keep fasting for the sake of the temple when the temple's actually now getting rebuilt? Does it make any sense to keep fasting? We fasted before because we lost the temple. Nebuchadnezzar burned it.

We were mourning. But now that it's being rebuilt, should we still keep on weeping and mourning? Is that even right? And now we're hearing word. The thing is well under construction.

It's likely to be completed. Do we keep fasting? So they send this delegation to the priests and prophets in Jerusalem. Notice Zechariah 7, 4, and 5. Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me.

This is Zechariah. Verse 5, Say to all the people of the land and the priests, when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month, they not only fasted then, they were asking about the fifth month, but God throws in here the seventh as well. For these, here we get the exact number of years, these 70 years while they were in captivity, was it for me that you fasted? Was it for me that you fasted? Now we're getting back at the heart of why we fast.

Was it for me? What an answer. But there's more. Read verse 6 with me.

This is interesting because their question is about fasting. When you eat and when you drink. Well wait, wait, wait, wait.

God just said to them, when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and the seventh, for these 70 years, was it for me that you fasted? And then he goes right on to say, their question isn't even about eating and drinking, it's about whether they should continue mourning and abstaining, fasting. But he goes on to say, when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? Like wow, Lord, why do you give them that bit of information when they're not even asking about eating and drinking? You get the idea that what was so important to the Jews, and it is. This is a really important question to these Jews.

They felt it so critical to figure out whether they should continue this or not continue this, that they actually go to the extent of sending a party of men to Jerusalem to get an answer. They obviously find Zechariah. Zechariah is a man who can give them an answer, right? He's a prophet of God.

He's got a connection with the Lord. They want to know, why would you even ask that question? Why would you even send this delegation to find out? Well, because you want to know what pleases the Lord. They're thinking, they're discussing among themselves.

They're getting together at Bethel and thinking, should we continue this? Which is pleasing to the Lord? Is it pleasing to the Lord that we continue to fast or is it pleasing to the Lord that we discontinue this fast? That's what they're asking about. But you see how God answers? God is saying to them, what's really and truly important to me is missed by your question altogether. You see, you guys are sitting there thinking that whether you fast or don't fast is going to make the difference.

And God's saying, it's not going to make any difference. I'm not pleased with you when you eat and drink. Nor am I pleased with you when you don't eat and drink.

Do you see the Lord's point? Your fifth month fast has been no good because you don't do it for Me. You don't do it for Me. And look, if that's all the Lord said, if He had stopped right there, they'd be going home thinking, oh, okay, so God's not pleased with the fast.

Okay guys, Bethel, we need to stop fasting. God will be pleased with this. No, it was necessary that He say the next thing so that they really get the point.

You guys have a bigger issue than whether you're fasting or not fasting. The way to please God is not for these people to simply quit the fast. The Lord says that's no good either because you give the fast up and you go back to eating and drinking.

You don't do that for Me either. You see, our primary question about fasting, because you get this all the time, well, how often should I fast? How long should I fast when I do fast? You know, what should this look like? Do I fast for a meal? Do I fast for a whole day? Three days? Seven days? For the Lord, look, I'll tell you this, if you're a Christian, then Jesus is clearly saying that fasting can be beneficial to you in order to receive the reward that God has. The greatest reward God can give you is Himself and greater manifestations of Himself.

That is the greatest thing He can give you. He is the greatest treasure that He has to give. And the thing is, when you're trying to concern yourself with how long, what should my frequency be, what should this look like, there's definitely benefit in it if you're doing it for the sake of God.

If you're just doing it mechanically, if you're just doing it because it's become tradition, because it's become habit, because the rest of the church does it, because GCC has this tradition of starting out each year with a week of prayer and fasting, okay, you're going to do this because... Look, the real issue in this is, look, you can eat and drink to the glory of God. You can fast and do that to the glory of the Lord, and then you can go back to eating and you can do it to the glory of the Lord and you don't have to feel a bit guilty. But the driving motivator here should be desire for God.

It should be desire for Him. It should be doing it for Him. He's saying, you didn't fast for Me and when you eat and drink, you do that for yourself.

It's our sights are set on the Lord. This is all God perspective here in fasting. That's the real issue.

We don't want to get so hung up on ritual. The Pharisee, oh, I fast twice in a week. You can get to where fasting just becomes ritualistic.

You just do it to do it. You do it because it's almost like you feel like there's some magic about it. You know, I fast and somehow I'm twisting God's arm to do this or do that for me.

That's not what this is about. You have to remember, Jesus is talking about when we fast, there's a God who sees in secret. And what's He looking at? Not just your fasting exercise.

He's looking at your heart. I mean, didn't Jesus come along and say, you know, Isaiah said the right thing about you guys. He was specifically talking about where Isaiah said that this people draw near to Me with their mouth.

But their hearts, they're far from Me. I mean, God looks at the heart. When you're talking about fasting, the thing is, there are times not to fast.

There are times when the bridegroom is there. It's time not to fast. Well, the bridegroom's been taken away.

We ought to be desperate. There ought to be lots of times when we're just desperate for having Him draw near. I mean, do you ever get just desperate? This is like, I don't have enough of God.

This is the thing. This is clearly the most important question that we need to be asking, is are we doing this for God? I mean, as far as frequency, yes, it's something you and I have to work through. It's something you and I have to ask questions about.

But questions, just the question about whether we fast or don't fast, you can tell, God thinks that's not the most important thing. It's a trifle. They totally miss what's essential when they're asking a question like that.

That's all we ask. Brethren, we need to be aware of ceremony and tradition and ritual and all of this. We need to be guided by desire.

I mean, that's a good thing to fast for. God, give me more desire for you. But look, you've got this promise.

You've got this promise sealed with the blood of Jesus Christ that if you fast in secret, there are rewards. I'll tell you this, Jesus did not say you will get these rewards whether you fast or not. He did not say that.

He did not say, well, this whole thing of fasting is just indifferent whether you do it or not. You get the same thing that you would have got anyways. That's never said about prayer and fasting in Scripture.

What you need to know is this, there are people in this world, Christians that fast, and they receive rewards from the Father that other people don't receive because they don't seek the Lord the same way. They're not as desperate. They don't need Him.

And so they don't get. Scripture says you don't have because you don't ask. We could as easily say, you don't have because you don't fast.

I mean, there may be things that you will not get unless you seek them with real diligent prayer and fasting. I mean, again, there's a textual issue, but there is a place where Jesus there in Mark 9 talks about this kind only goes out by prayer and fasting. He's talking about spiritual battles, one or lost, that hinge on prayer and fasting.

The textual issue is that some of the manuscripts have fasting and some don't. But even that regardless, prayer is there in all of them. It's the fact that there is a kind of prayer.

And there is a kind of prayer that goes along with fasting. It's an intensified way of seeking the Lord. And the Lord, look, when your heart is towards Him and your heart is yearning towards Him, God sees us fasting like that.

It's very pleasing to Him. Very pleasing when we're desperate, when we're longing because the bridegroom has been taken away. It's worship.

Do we see that with Anna? It's worship. This is a way to worship. But God never wants your worship when it's only with your lips or it's only in a mechanical way performed by your bodily, you know, yes, we can grit our teeth and not eat.

God doesn't want that. That's not true worship. Worship is from the heart.

God wants us to worship with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. That's what He's looking at. That's what's pleasing to Him.

It's not just a matter of should I fast or should I not fast? It's more a matter of where the heart is in all of it. And if our heart is desperate for God, you would think fasting is going to be something that is going to be simultaneous to our desperation. I mean, in this life when we want and we desire and we hunger and we long for more of Him, more of that reward that only He can give, then we know by faith, we know He's watching.

By faith, we know that He rewards us. I mean, the big things that you... The big things, those things you're desperate for in life, those things that you know if God doesn't give them to you, you will not have. The salvation of people's souls, the advance of the gospel.

The big things, big things in life. I mean, major things. You're trying to figure out, you know, if you want to marry somebody or you're trying to figure out, you know, leadership for the church or what missionaries we're going to be sent.

These are appropriate times to be fasting, big decisions in your life, where you need to lay hold on God. You need an answer. You need Him.

You do it for Him. Because look, any approach to God that makes Him great. Not that we do, but you know how we talk about magnifying the Lord.

That doesn't mean we make Him bigger than He already is. He's... When we magnify the Lord, all we do is come closer and closer to a proper perspective of what He is, who He is, how He is, what His attributes are. But brethren, when we're going to God in desperation, you know what that does? You know what it communicates? I recognize I'm needy, I'm desperate, I'm helpless, I'm bankrupt, and He is the fountain of all good.

He is Jehovah Jireh. I need Him. He's the provider.

He's glorified when we view Him like that. And if we really do, if we recognize how utterly desperate we are, and bankrupt we are in ourselves, and just the riches that are to be had, this treasure house of riches that are in Christ Jesus. Like I say, the greatest riches that God can give us is His own Son, and His own self, fellowship with Himself.

Oh brethren, you get overwhelmed by the presence of God, and you don't want anything else in this world. There's nothing greater than that. And for Him to sweep us ultimately into His presence, where we can behold Him face to face, and be married to Him, be His bride, walk with Him, and talk with Him, behold His glory.

There will be nothing greater than just beholding the glory of Jesus Christ. Don't you want more now? Aren't you desperate for that? That's what this is all about. When you hunger after that, and you actually fast because you long for that, that is worship.

God is very pleased when your heart's in it. Have you got to the place where you just feel like, well, my heart's just not in prolonging this fast. I feel like right now I could just sit down and eat a steak, and I could do that more to His glory.

Well, then do it! Eat your steak! If there's nothing in your life that's that desperate at the moment, go eat your steak and praise God for it. That's the word on fasting. A brief theology on fasting.

Hopefully that helps maybe bring a little bit more clarity. Father, we pray that the reality of this that we see in Scripture might be true in our lives and true in our church, especially in this season where we give ourselves just such fasting. Make us desperate for You, Father, we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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