

Key texts: Nehemiah 9:1-3, Esther 9:30-32, Psalm 35:11-13, Isaiah 58, Daniel 9:2-4, Matthew 4:1-3, Matthew 6:17-18, Romans 12:1-2, Acts 13:2, Acts 14:23, Leviticus 23:26-32

Matthew 6:16

“When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”

Introduction

- This week is our Week of Prayer.
- It is good to reflect with thankfulness of what God did in us and amongst us in 2024.
- It is good to dream some dreams and talk about what we would love God to do in us and through us in 2025.
- Prayer is the mysterious conduit for the activity of a sovereign God.
- God who is mighty, holy, and sovereign works his Kingdom in response to our prayers.
- Prayer matters.
- When I pray more, more GOD stuff happens!!
- I want to keep growing in prayer and I am increasingly challenged about fasting!

Fasting the forgotten discipline?

- It seems like we have forgotten about fasting.
- 20 years ago a week of prayer would always have included fasting.
- As part of the Newfrontiers family, I would go away for 48 hours three times a year with hundreds of other leaders, and we would fast and pray together.
- For hundreds of years fasting was as key a discipline as prayer, bible reading, or gathering for corporate worship.
- John Wesley was concerned about this drift in the 1760s – he wrote in his diary:

“I fear there are now 1000s of methodist so called both in England and Ireland following with bad example that they have almost totally abandoned the discipline of fasting who are so far from fasting twice a week they barely fast twice a month”

- I’m not sure I would want him to comment on my fasting now!
- Now I am making a generalised comment – you may be fasting twice weekly as per John Wesley’s expectation – but many of us are not.
- Why?

Why is fasting out of fashion?

- It's not.
- Not outside the church.
- Fasting is hugely fashionable.
- Intermittent fasting is one of the most popular diets in the Western world.
- 13% of Americans undertook some kind of intermittent fasting in 2023.
- In the UK there are over 100,000 unique searches for intermittent fasting a month.
- Fasting is big business in the parts of the world where food is plentiful and obesity is on the rise.
- But fasting as a spiritual discipline? That seems to be a different matter.
- How is it that Christians are happy to fast to lose weight, but don't seem to fast to engage with God?
- How might we rediscover and embrace the biblical discipline of fasting?

Well let's seek to answer that big question by answering some smaller ones:

- What is a biblical fast?
- Why do people fast in scripture?
- How did the early church fast?
- Why might we fast?
- How might we grow in fasting?

What is a biblical fast?

Daniel 9:2-4

In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

"Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

- These words are from the book of Daniel in the Old Testament.
- Daniel is in exile and he has realised as he has studied the scriptures, the book of Jeremiah, that God has promised to return his people to their land after a set time.
- Daniel is so stirred by these words that he petitions God in prayer and as part of his prayer life he fasts.

- He does not eat!!
- Fasting is going without food.
- I could have chosen a number of other passages from the Old Testament that refer to fasting – Esther, Nehemiah, Moses.
- But I chose Daniel because sometimes Christians talk about a “Daniel fast”, based on Daniel chapter 1.

Daniel 1:11-13

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”

- Daniel chapter 1 is not about fasting, it is about abstinence.
- This is not bad.
- Daniel, under the wisdom of God, comes up with a plan of abstinence from foods sacrificed to Babylonian gods – it is a good plan and it works.
- But it is not fasting.
- When I say I am fasting from social media, or chocolate, or coffee – I am not fasting – I am practicing the discipline of abstinence.
- Biblical fasting is about not eating food.

Why do people fast in scripture?

Numbers 29:7

‘On the tenth day of this seventh month hold a sacred assembly. You must deny yourselves and fast and do no work.’

- To answer the question of why the people of God fasted we must look at when they fasted.
- There is only one prescribed fast in the law – mentioned here in Numbers 29 – the people were called to fast/deny themselves on the day of atonement (also Leviticus 23:26-32).
- On the day when they declared their dependence on God for forgiveness of their sins and their covenant relationship with Yahweh, they fast!
- So, in terms of a rhythm of fasting there were lots of feasts – but only one annual fast (nice balance 😊).
- But fasting is mentioned another 16 times in the Old Testament.

- It is clear from these references, even famously in Isaiah 58 where God criticises their motivation for fasting, that fasting was a spiritual discipline for the people of God.
- The people of God fasted when they were under threat (Esther).
- The people of God fasted for breakthrough (Daniel).
- The people of God fasted as a sign of humility and repentance (Nehemiah).
- The people of God fasted as part of their ongoing worship (Isaiah 58).

How did the early church fast?

- We might get confused when we listen to Jesus on fasting.
- In Matthew 6 it is clear Jesus expects or assumes his followers will fast:

Matthew 6:16

“When you fast do not....”

- But in Matthew 9 it appears they are not fasting:

Matthew 9:15

Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

- As ever context is everything.
- Jesus clearly loves food.
- Some scholars suggest that in the gospels Jesus is portrayed as eating, on his way to eat, or has just eaten!
- It is not entirely true, but food is a big deal in Eastern culture and was for 1st century Israel.
- Jesus is constantly eating with the wrong sort of people and at the wrong times.
- Clearly, by the time of Jesus the Talmud, the law around the LAW, has created times to fast each week.
- As with other parts of Jesus' teaching, in Matthew 9 he is challenging the religiosity that is attached to these numerous man made laws.
- Jesus is not prohibiting fasting – he is placing fasting in its proper place – a spiritual discipline that equips the believer – not a law that must be kept so that God loves you and others admire you!
- Hence, when we get into the life of the early church, described in Acts and in the Didache (early church foundations course!) fasting is a part of their spiritual life.

- They fasted to hear God and make decisions (Acts 13 and 14).
- They followed a pattern of fasting from Judaism, but on different days.
- Wednesday and Friday as opposed to Monday and Thursday.
- They would have fasted from sunrise to sunset.

Why might we fast?

- Although we have only had time for a quick look at fasting in scripture it is clear that New Testament Christianity, built on the foundations of Judaism, included fasting as a spiritual discipline.
- Does this mean we should fast?
- At one level the answer is no.
- Though modern Judaism fasts to remember key events in Israel's history (Purim and the rescue of the Jews in the time of Esther) – the only fast in the law is the day of atonement.
- Given that the day of atonement is a shadow of the cross, Christians do not need to practice an atonement fast.
- As Christians, we cannot point to a law and say therefore we must fast:
- No one should feel compelled to fast.
- Indeed if you have medical conditions or a history of struggling with food based issues you should only fast if you know your physical and mental health will not suffer!
- But, when I consider the reasons for fasting I am increasingly challenged that fasting should be as much part of my spiritual disciplines as scripture, prayer, worship, and generosity.

John Mark Comer summarises the reasons for fasting under four headings and I find these headings a helpful provocation.

Four biblical and church history reasons for fasting:

1. To offer ourselves to Jesus.
2. To grow in holiness.
3. To amplify our prayers.
4. To stand with the poor.

Let's unpack those a bit:

To offer ourselves to Jesus

- Fasting on the day of atonement reminded the people of their dependence on God.
- I need reminding of that dependence.
- I do not need to fast on an annual day of atonement because I stand in the good of the cross and the empty tomb.
- But our need for food means that when we fast, we do get hungry.
- That hunger reminds us of how dependent we are on God.
- When we are well fed, we can feel very powerful and independent.
- Hunger quickly reveals we are not as together as we think we are and I am quickly reminded of my desperate need of grace.
- Fasting deals a death blow to arrogance and pride and throws me back on God's faithfulness.

To grow in holiness

- The first time I ever fasted was not as a spiritual discipline.
- I signed up for a sponsored 24 hour fast when I was at university to raise money for a charity.
- My flatmates were supportive – ish.
- They sponsored me, which was nice.
- But once I got past 12 hours, they systematically placed food in my line of sight – challenging my self-control.
- Fasting develops and makes space for self-control.
- For most of us, food is available on demand.
- When we fast, we deny ourselves a perfectly natural need – the need for food.
- Fasting creates self-control which can then be applied to desires, that though they may appear natural, are harmful.
- Self-control is both a means and a result (fruit) of sanctification.
- I am justified now, in Christ I am seen as holy by God.
- But I am being transformed, I am being made like Jesus, I am being sanctified.
- Resisting temptation is a key to accessing the grace to say no to sin and the stronger my self-control the more I can resist.

To amplify our prayers

- This is a tricky one – in fasting am I twisting God's arm?
- Is fasting simply a hunger strike to place my demands before God?
- Absolutely not.
- But when the people of God want to get real with God.
- When the pressure is on.
- When they are desperate for breakthrough.
- They fast.
- It doesn't improve God's hearing, or increase his power, but it does expose what I am genuinely passionate about.
- It amplifies our prayers because it increases our seriousness and it improves our hearing.

To stand with the poor

- Millions of people will go to bed hungry this evening and many of them will be children.
- In the UK it is estimated that 4.3 million children live below the poverty line.
- We are the 6th largest economy in the world.
- We waste 22% of the food we buy.
- When I fast for a day, I feel hungry.
- But I feel hungry knowing there is food in the fridge.
- I feel hungry in a warm house with a choice of clothes to wear.
- I feel hungry with money in the bank and savings in an ISA.
- Fasting makes me aware of all the blessings I have received, and in those moments of hunger, I am reminded of my responsibility to use the blessing I have received to help those who are hungry all the time!

How might we grow in fasting?

- Jesus fasted for 40 days.
- I don't suggest we start there.
- If you want to start fasting, I suggest you adopt the principles of any habit builder:

Start

- You don't have to do 40 days, but you need to do something.
- Agree a manageable step with a muppet friend and do it.

Reduce in manageable steps

- Cut out one meal in your day.
- Cut out two meals.
- Cut out three meals.

Replace

- If you keep everything else the same and simply try not to eat you will struggle.
- Use the time you would have been eating or preparing food to pray, worship, open the Bible.
- Don't just do more work or watch another episode on Netflix.

Rejoice

- Create times of celebration – especially if you end up doing longer fasts.
- If you have missed breakfast and lunch change how you might eat dinner, where, and with whom if you can.
- Fasting can release fresh joy in food.

Final Words

- I don't have to fast.
- God will not love me more if I fast.
- I am not telling you that you must fast.

But

- There is a biblical spiritual discipline freely offered to me by God.
- It can help me get closer to God.
- It can impact the impact of my prayer life.
- It can develop self-control and break sinful strongholds in my life.
- It can stir in me a spirit of thankfulness and develop a deeper concern for the poor.
- I don't have to fast.
- You don't have to fast.
- We don't have to fast.
- But with all the blessing and freedom in Christ on offer.
- Why would we choose not to?