

Spiritual Rhythms | Fasting

#1: Fasting with Purpose

Selected passages

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- February 2, 2025

We're in a series together called *Spiritual Rhythms* that will last for most of our semester. It gets us to Easter. And we're looking at habits of the Christian life, and we're trying to go a little bit deeper than when we typically spend a week on each one. So, we spent a month on prayer. And this month we're starting a new discipline, and it's fasting. Just so you know, it's the shortest month of the entire year and we're only going to spend three weeks on it, so ... I'm looking out for you here!

And if you're thinking that we're moving on from praying, no, no—on the contrary, we're keeping prayer with fasting. It's an additive. Because throughout the Bible, you'll see them paired together. You'll see in the Bible prayer and fasting, or, fasting and prayer. As a matter of fact, I would even go so far as to say that today's learning time is really just part two. If you haven't heard last week's sermon, it might be worth listening to again. You'll see that these two things complement each other, and they build upon one another—fasting and prayer, prayer and fasting.

There are multiple purposes in fasting, but what we're looking at today, spiritually speaking, is a mystery. It's a mystery that fasting somehow amplifies our prayers to God. There's something about fasting. It looks as though it's an additive to our prayer, so that which was once stuck is now unstuck. Fasting is as though you have a megaphone when you're praying, even in your whispers in times of desperation. Something's happening there, and I hope you heard me say in three different ways that I do not know why it works. You look at the patterns in the Bible and you can see that people fast and pray.

And today there are different reasons to fast. And today we're going to look specifically at times in the Bible where circumstances overwhelm a person or a nation, and they say, *We have to fast and pray. This is bigger than what we ever could have imagined, so we have to do something about this to get God into this circumstance.*

Sorry, it's a little irreverent, but when I was thinking about this all week long, what came to mind was that classic movie with an iconic line—the movie *Jaws*. The first time they're out hunting the great white shark, the sheriff sees the great white firsthand, close-up. And he immediately goes into shock. He stumbles his way onto the bridge and tells the head shark hunter (actually, there was a made-up line right there—it was impromptu)—“We're going to need a bigger boat.”

And there are life circumstances at times in our lives or in the lives of people who we truly care about that overwhelm us. And sometimes, even our nation is in peril, and we feel like prayer needs a bigger focus. We need to do more than just pray. And you'll see this throughout the Bible—yeah, there is something else you can do: fast and pray, pray and fast.

There's a spiritual chemistry that seems to be taking place when you combine fasting and prayer. You'll see passages where people just fast without prayer, and you'll see people pray without fasting. But it's a spiritual chemistry: when you mix them together, there's a reaction where something else happens and comes into existence. It is amplifying our prayer somehow.

What Is Fasting?

So, when we talk about fasting, let's start here—with the fundamentals of fasting. One, what does it mean to fast? What is fasting? That's when we abstain from eating food for a designated period of time.

Now, just a regular fast—what we would call normal fasting—allows a person to drink water, or, in our case, tea or coffee. And then there's a different kind of fast that happens in the Bible and, also in modern day, called total fasting. Sometimes it's called dry fasting. And that means nothing—you eat and drink nothing. And it's rough. It's called total fasting.

How long does a person fast? There's no set time. It's up to the individual. It's between you and God. Again, there are two different kinds of fasting in the Bible. There's a rhythm of fasting, and that means it's part of your regular routine. And in that case, a lot of the fasting is to abstain from eating from the time you get up in the morning until sunset, when you eat dinner. Today we call that intermittent fasting. As long as the sun is out, you don't eat. That's the most common one that's used in the Bible.

The second one down from that is a 24-hour fast. In the Bible, it's anywhere from a one-day fast to a 40-day fast, whatever you feel like the Lord is leading you to do.

The History of Fasting

If you look at the history of fasting, it's somewhat fascinating. Christianity is not the only faith system that endorses and encourages fasting. As a matter of fact, you'd be hard pressed to find any type of religion that doesn't include fasting; that doesn't expect its disciples to fast. That's certainly the case with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the Hindu faith. Indigenous people in their faiths include fasting. There's a lot of power involved in it. Even the intellectuals throughout history—in China, Confucius expected his disciples to fast. And then, the classic Greek philosophers—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—all participated in fasting and expected their students to do the same.

Today, even the cool kids—I mean, it's cool to fast again. And the ideas of intermittent fasting and long periods of fasting have both been studied in health and wellness communities to bring about significant change in our physiology, not just our body, but our brain as well. It's very healthy.

But we're talking about spiritual fasting. And oddly enough, the first time fasting is mentioned in human history is in the Bible. It's in Exodus 24. It's when Moses goes to the top of Mt. Sinai to receive the Law of God to Israel. And in that period of time he's up at Mt. Sinai for forty days, and he's fasting that entire time. When he comes down from the mountain—part of the law requires this annual event called the Day of Atonement—it's the most holy day for the Jewish calendar. Today it's called Yom Kippur. And on that day, Israel is to fast. That is the only time in the Bible that fasting is commanded by God.

And so, from Exodus 24 on, you'll see that fasting is part of the Old Testament life. Many of the heroes and saints of the Old Testament are going to lead by example in fasting and praying.

By the time Jesus enters the picture, after the 400 years of silence, Jews were expected to fast twice per week until sundown. It was twice per week, Mondays and Thursdays. It was just part of the life of a Jew. And so, when Jesus teaches on fasting in Matthew 6 in the great sermon "The Sermon on the Mount," He says, "*When* you fast ..." He doesn't say, "*If* you fast ..." He's assuming you're fasting. And then He gives parameters such as not drawing attention to yourself.

Throughout church history, you're going to see over and over again through the centuries, fasting is exalted as the way of getting in touch with God—not just in the rhythms of your spiritual life, but also, in difficult circumstances, a purposeful fast.

Here are some quotes throughout the ages.

Fasting possesses great power and it works glorious things. To fast is to banquet with angels.

---St. Athanasius the Great

“Fasting possesses great power and it works glorious things.” This is a great line. “To fast is to banquet with angels.”

Fasting “enlightens the soul, gives wing to, and makes even the scaling of the mountain with ease. The fast is food for the soul.

---St. John Chrysostom

Fasting actually “enlightens the soul, gives wings to,”—makes it lighter—“and makes even the scaling of the mountain with ease. The fast is food for the soul.”

If the Law-giver Himself fasted, is it not also necessary for those for whom the law is given to fulfill the fast?

---St. Isaac the Syrian

Here's one more. This is good. “If the Law-giver Himself”—Jesus—“fasted, is it not also necessary for those for whom the law is given to fulfill the fast?”

Many of you have practiced some kind of fasting. Maybe if you grew up in a church that observed Lent (Lent is the forty days prior to Easter—it's from Ash Wednesday—the forty days represent the forty days Jesus was in the desert fasting). And modern expressions of Lent rarely

include fasting, but rather abstaining. It's usually abstaining from some kind of vice, a personal vice like giving up being on the internet or watching TV, or eating sweets, or drinking alcohol. That's not technically fasting, but you get the idea.

The reason I'm bringing this up is because, for about 1700 years, Lent was fasting from food. For forty days you didn't eat until sunset. And that was preparing you for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If that sounds remotely familiar, you're right—Ramadan, Islam's expression, has that discipline from Lent, when people actually fasted from food.

Purposes of Fasting

So, here's the point. You have the Old Testament teaching it, the New Testament teaching it, church history talks about it, and 3500 years of practice of fasting and prayer; there's a rhythm to fasting, and it adds power to your prayer. And then there's purpose in fasting: God's insertion into the circumstances of life.

There are two different types of fasting that are taught in the Bible, generally speaking. There's a rhythm that we'll talk about next week, a lifestyle for almost 2500 years or so: twice a week, Wednesdays and Fridays.

And this week we're looking at responsive fasting, as some call it, or purposeful fasting, where some kind of national crisis takes place, or an event of personal desperation, and people say, *Well, something needs to be added*. **Scot McKnight calls it "life's sacred moments."** Life's sacred moments are when you say, *We're going to need a bigger boat. Prayer just doesn't seem to be enough, and something needs to be added*. And what is added in the Bible is fasting—fasting and prayer.

2 Samuel 12:16

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.

We looked at this last week, but I just want to emphasize again that David, when his son was struck with an illness unto death, goes before the Lord and fasts as he prays. "David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the night lying on the ground." God's will be done—the child did pass away.

2 Samuel 12:22

David answered, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.’”

And so, David is explaining what he did and why. “David answered, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, “Who knows? Jehovah may be gracious to me and let the child live.”’” Who knows?

Do you have a particular illness, or maybe a friend of yours has a sickness and it won't go away? And it seems as though praying about it is just not enough? And if there was just some kind of additive that could unstick what seems to be stuck ... Might I suggest that it's fasting? Add fasting to your prayer. Fast and pray ... who knows? Who knows? I mean, God may be gracious and release you from a chronic illness. Who knows? Have you tried fasting with prayer?

In the Book of Esther, the Hebrews are about to be obliterated. Genocide is all but certain. And the only possible way they can survive this is because Queen Esther finds herself surrendering to God and doing what is next, and that would be to consult the king. She can be used by God to consult the king, but it is at the risk of her very life. She could die for interrupting his day. And so, there's a significant change in her life. She realizes the part she has to play, and she takes charge at that moment. And she gives the first command in the storyline, and her command is to fast. There's an assumption of prayer here because of the way the book is written incognito, so they don't mention any spiritual things. So, I'm going to insert that.

Esther 4:15-17

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” ¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Here’s what it says in Esther 4: “Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast’”—fast and pray—“ ‘on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do.’” This is that total fast.

“ ‘Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law to do so, and if I perish, I perish.’ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.”

When a nation is in peril, you should fast and pray. And is it any wonder that over the years in my lifetime, I’ve seen Billy Graham, and then Franklin Graham, and other national spiritual leaders, at times of critical points in our nation’s history, call the country to not just pray, because they understand the power that’s involved—the magic fasting and prayer.

If you read the Bible, what’s interesting is that even pagan countries—I don’t know why—understand there’s some kind of mystery to fasting and prayer. Because they know that, somehow, they can get the attention of God by not eating or drinking, just going before the Lord hoping that He might change because of that.

In the Book of Jonah, Jonah is a prophet who is sent to the capital city of Assyria. The name of that city is Nineveh. And the violence of that city is notorious, and the blood of the victims has cried out. And God says, *I’m done. My patience is over. They have forty days—spread the word, Jonah—in forty days they will experience absolute destruction.*

Jonah 3:5-9

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish."

But after the prophet gives that prophecy to the city of Nineveh, they believe God. And then they're out to change God's heart. Here's how it reads: "The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put of sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.'" The geese are fasting in this storyline, okay?

"'But let the people and the animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently upon God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish.'"

Jonah 3:10

When God saw what they did and how they relented from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened.

So, what happens? In chapter 3, verse 10: "When God saw what they did and how they relented from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened."

The author here is being very playful on purpose with words. He's using the same Hebrew word to describe the heart of the people and the heart of God. The Hebrew word can be translated as "relent" or "change" or "changed their mind." And so, he says, *Look what happened. The people changed their hearts.* How do you know? How convincing were they? They fasted and prayed; even the livestock wore sackcloth. And because of that, the heart of God relented; it changed.

Because man relents in respect to sin, God relents in respect to judgment ... Man's change of heart makes it morally possible for God to behave differently towards him, yet acting consistently with His holy character and principles.

---Arthur Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast*

There's a great comment on this passage from Arthur Wallis. It says, "Because man relents in respect to sin, God relents in respect to judgment ... Man's change of heart makes it morally possible for God to behave differently towards him, yet acting consistently with His holy character and principles."

This harkens back to last week's lesson. Let's not assume that God is going to do whatever He's going to do, whether we pray or not. That is not a biblical view of prayer. Because throughout the Bible, look at the saints saying, "Who knows?" Even the Ninevites: *Who knows? If we ask and we seek the Lord and we fast and we pray—maybe if we change our hearts, God will change His heart. We don't know what His providential will is. Maybe this is just His permissive will.*

Do you have somebody who is in need of a heart change? You know, when someone you love is like a prodigal child, it feels as though your soul is chained to an anchor and it's just at the bottom of the ocean, and you don't feel heard. You just feel misery. And you carry it with you wherever you go. And in prayer sometimes you're just praying that they come to their senses, like the prodigal son. And we need a bigger boat. Would you consider this? What if you were to fast and pray? And not just fast and pray—but look at what the Ninevites did. Learn from the Ninevites. Bring your whole tribe into this, your friends and your family. Bring everyone you know into this fasting and praying event, because something is stuck and it needs

to get unstuck. And who knows? Who knows? That son, that daughter, that friend, that person you love so much might have a change of heart.

In Nehemiah—some of you know the story—in the first few verses, Nehemiah hears from a messenger about the blitzkrieg that Jerusalem experienced and how the walls have been torn down and set on fire, and how vulnerable they've become. His initial reaction, the first way he responds is this: "For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." He's asking the God of heaven, *What should I do about this?*

When you get to the New Testament in the Book of Acts, the Church is brand new, and they don't know what they're doing. They don't. They don't know what to do with the eternal, powerful message of the Gospel. They don't know who should go, they don't know how they should go, they don't know where they're supposed to go. And so, they're looking for something more than discernment; they're looking for a word from God Himself. They're saying, *Holy Spirit, You've got to get in here. Just tell us what to do.*

Acts 13:2, 3

While they were 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." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

And here's how they're asking the Spirit to do that in chapter 13, verse 2: "And while they were 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.'" So, they do. And the next sentence says, "So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

When you have some big decision banging at your door, nagging you—*Choose! You've got to make a choice!*

But it's a life-altering choice! And I've been praying about it!

Maybe you should fast and pray for clarity from the Holy Spirit. *Come on, Holy Spirit, get in here and tell me what to do!* Who knows ... who knows ... maybe that's just the thing.

I don't know why this works. I just know there's a pattern. I'm not pretending to even assume, but the pattern is in the Old Testament, it's in the New Testament. There's a spiritual chemistry happening here, that if you add fasting to prayer, there's some kind of supernatural power. It amplifies what we're saying to God. It's an additive that unsticks what was stuck. It's a bullhorn, so that when we moan and we cry in the Spirit, the message that it sends to God is clear somehow.

Guide to Fasting

So, listen, we're going to add fasting to our prayer in our disciplines as a church. Here are little guides to fasting. February is the month for prayer and fasting, fasting and prayer. And so, I thought I would give you some fundamentals here.

Next week we'll look at the rhythm of fasting as a lifestyle. Again, I'm focusing on responsive fasting or purposeful fasting, as it's called.

So, here are three points, three little things for homework assignments.

1. Pick one of "life's sacred moments."

The first one is this. You pick, as McKnight called it, one of "life's sacred moments." Pick one of life's sacred moments. You might not be going through something like that right now—I know that happens. So, that's why you're part of a fellowship. That's why you're part of a church and even smaller groups—your small group, for example. Maybe the whole group goes in on one person's need of a bigger boat, and you adopt that and take that on. You could go to the prayer cards that we gave out. They're online if you want to download them. Any one of the days has a topic, and any one of those topics is enough to have a purposeful fast and prayer over.

Somewhere in your life where you feel like prayer needs help—in the language of Celebrate Recovery, a hurt, habit, or hangup—some would just say you have an addiction, and you can't break it. Have you tried fasting and prayer? Fast and pray.

2. Pick a day to fast

The second part of our homework assignment together is that, after you've picked what you're going to fast for, pick a day to fast. And I would suggest you start small and win. You can do a partial fast where you just miss one meal, maybe two meals. You could do a fast where all you're eating is fruit, or all you're eating is vegetables. (And that's miserable—you should just stop eating altogether.)

And if some of you can't do the food fast, then you could fast from something that occupies a lot of your time, whether it's television or the internet—whatever it might be. Use that time to pray and fast.

Some of you, if you want to go to this next level, fast once a week at least. It's not a problem to me. So, I've tried this week (for this sermon) the dry fast—a total fast. I'm eating nothing—not a TicTac, not a piece of gum. And your breath stinks. And this got me—this was when I started fasting. It hurt. I was trying for this 48-hour dry fast, and the first 24 hours, it's just like they promised. After you get over that hump, it got a lot easier ... after I quit and just ate dinner it was easy. I just figured, *Look, the sun is setting somewhere over Frankfurt*. I gave up.

But the point is, I ended the week as a loser, and I should have just gone for a 24-hour total fast, since it was the first time I'd done it in my whole life, you know? That's my problem.

3. Memorize and Meditate on Scripture

Two, pick a day and a means of fasting that helps you be encouraged. And then the third thing is, what do you do when you're fasting? I would say to memorize and meditate on Scripture. Look at last week, the way we are trying to saturate our souls when the mind of God and the heart of God. You could be praying through Scripture, you could attach one of the attributes of God; every time you have a hunger pang, you're attributing an attribute of God towards that particular problem that needs to be solved. *I'm calling upon the mercies of God to help my son. I'm calling upon the names of God, Jehovah Jireh, that He would provide a job for me.* Fast and pray to Jehovah Jireh. I'm going to fast and pray to the attribute of God that fits my need.

Fasting helps us to activate God's power.

---Tony Evans

Tony Evans says that sometimes when it feels like there's a wall between you and God or a wall between you and God's power, "Fasting helps us to activate the power of God." He doesn't explain why. He just tells us how.

Now, just a little pause for caution. This isn't a formula. This isn't obligating God. This is not a new way to rub the lamp and He's going to come out finally and give you what you want. Who knows? It's not like a hunger strike until God acquiesces to our command. It's a mystery. And Scripture says that somehow and for some reason fasting is needed sometimes to amplify our prayers, because who knows? God Almighty might just step into this and make things glorious for His fame.

Our lives in America and in the entire West changed on a single day. It was a Friday. It was May 24, 1940. And that was the day that our linear history came to a T in the road of our future. We could go left, or we could go right. Our civilization hinged on the next twenty-four hours.

Leading up to May 24, 1940, the Nazi army was just absolutely pulverizing the Allied troops to the point where they had them pinned against the ocean on a beach in Dunkirk. About 340,000 troops are trapped. They have two choices. They could surrender, or they could be killed in action. That's all. It was over. This is at the beginning of the war.

And then, a mystery. Still to this day, no one can explain it. But Hitler halted his armored division ten miles outside of Dunkirk. Nobody knows why. And then, (and this is especially strange) a mist, a fog with smoke, descends upon the entire area so that the Luftwaffe (the German airplanes) couldn't take to the skies and bomb these troops into submission. And then, the strangest miracle of all: the English Channel, famous for its winds and its waves, was pacified. It is as though someone said, "Stop. Cease. Sit. Stay." It's as though the winds and the waves obeyed Him. Scholars and historians said it was as though the English Channel was bath water. All of that happened so that hundreds of civilian putter boats could come from England to Dunkirk and shuttle these soldiers back to safety. They could cross the Channel in safety.

Some of you might have seen the movie by Christopher Nolan called *Dunkirk*, or you might have studied it yourself. Depending on what college you went to and their view of history, they'll tell you what I just said. Something else happened on that Friday, May 24. Because the King of England knew that they were done. And the only way they could survive is if God Almighty intervened; if the God of war, the Lord of Hosts, were to show up; if the God of weather were to enter this war for the sake of civilization and truth and love.

And so, King George pronounced a decree and said all of England would spend that day fasting and praying. *Who knows? Maybe, just maybe ...* Tens of thousands of people surrounded Westminster Abbey and begged God to get in this fight, because there was no way they could otherwise win it.

Just a few hours after that prayer vigil, that fasting and praying, Hitler said to his tank division, "Stop right here." And that's why we speak English and not German. The great Battle of Dunkirk was just a strategic escape. It was a retreat that led to Normandy. And if you are taught about the Battle of Dunkirk in most colleges today, they'll call it "The Battle of Dunkirk." What's interesting is that the generation that lived and saw that doesn't call it "The Battle of Dunkirk." They call it "The Miracle at Dunkirk," because it was. Because King George called upon the people to fast and pray, and God heard them in this place of desperation. That's the power.

It's odd that, with the exception of Yom Kippur, fasting is never commanded in the Bible, not in the Old Testament or the New Testament. But everyone does it. The Old Testament saints were involved in fasting and praying, the New Testament saints were fasting and praying. Jesus was known for His praying and His fasting. In early church history, that was the case as well. Somehow, fasting with prayer connects us to God in a special way. It amplifies our desperation. It's an additive that unsticks what is stuck. I don't know how it works. But we should do it. Right, Grace? Let's do this. February is fast and pray. You have your assignment. Let's do that. Next week we'll talk about the rhythm of fasting and praying. This week let's let God slay some giants for us, some experience in our life or the lives of the people around us, where we just say, *Prayer's going to need a bigger boat. We're going to need to miss a meal for this one. Somehow let's get God's attention.* Let's fast and pray.

Let's pray.

Lord, we are, again, marveling at the mystery of who You are and the way You work. And now You tease us. You don't tell us why this works, but You just show us. So, Lord, we enjoy the mystery of it. We do not obligate You by our temporary indigestion.

But Lord, I'd ask that You help us. I'd ask that You give us some wonderful stories about how fasting entered the game, and so did You. I'd ask that You give us God stories that would convince us that purposeful fasting is a way to ignite our prayer life, to turn loose Your power on our everyday lives. Who knows? Who knows if You might intervene on our behalf?

Lord, I'd ask that You would make us a church that is known for fasting and praying and seeing You doing the miraculous. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our King. And everybody said, Amen.