



Session 7, Acts

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Prayer in Acts—all the way to Revelation. Let's do it.

95. ACTS 1, 2, 6: A CHURCH DEVOTED TO PRAYER

Three distinct times in Acts we see the church described as devoted to prayer—in Acts 1:14, 2:42 and 6:4. Why were they so devoted to prayer? **They utterly dependent on God's power.** In your Study Guide, I tried to show you how every major move of God's Spirit in God's power came about in response to God's people praying. They were gathered together in Acts 1:14, devoted to prayer. In Acts 2, the Spirit of God came down like flames of fire and 3,000 people are saved. In Acts 3, Peter and John went up to the temple for a time of prayer.

By the beginning of Acts 4, many of those who had heard the word believed and the number of men grew to about 5,000. Acts 6 says they devoted themselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word, then immediately we hear that *"the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem."* At the end of Acts 7, Stephen looked up to heaven and prayed. Right after that in Acts 8, the church scattered to Judea and Samaria, preaching the gospel wherever they go.

In Acts 9, Paul was saved, connected with Ananias, all in the context of prayer. Same thing in Acts 10, where Peter and Cornelius were praying and the door was opened for the spread of the gospel to the nations. In Acts 12, Peter is in jail, the church is praying, an angel pokes him in the side and leads him outside. In Acts 13, the church leaders were worshiping, fasting and praying, and the Spirit said, "Set apart Saul and Barnabas for the work to which I called them," and a missionary movement was born that turned the entire Roman Empire upside down. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were praying in the middle of prison and God responded with an earthquake. A jailer and his family were saved.

The early church was utterly dependent on God's power and utterly desperate for God's grace (Acts 6:8; 11:23; 13:43; 14:3, 26; 15:11; 18:27; 20:24, 32). Passage after passage point to God's gracious hand at work among them and **they were utterly dedicated to God's mission.** *"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8).

Devotion to prayer springs from dependence upon God's power, desperation for God's grace and dedication to God's mission. Listen to these quotes. First, from Jonathan Edwards, "When God has

something very great to accomplish for His church, it is His will that there should precede it, the extraordinary prayers of His people.”

Charles Spurgeon said:

If a church is to be what it ought to be for the purposes of God, we must train it in the holy art of prayer. Churches without prayer meetings are grievously common. Even if there were only one such, it would be one to weep over. In many churches the prayer meeting is only the skeleton of a gathering; the form is kept up, but the people do not come. There is no interest, no power, in connection with the meeting. Oh, let it not be so with you! Do train the people to continually meet together for prayer. Rouse them to incessant supplication. There is a holy art in it. Study to show yourselves approved by the prayerfulness of Your people. If you pray yourself, you will want them to pray with you, and when they begin to pray with you, and for you, and for the work of the Lord, they will want more prayer themselves, and the appetite will grow. Believe me, if a church does not pray, it is dead. Instead of putting united prayer last, put it first. Everything will hinge upon the power of prayer in the church.

Jonathan Edwards again:

When God is about to bestow some great blessing on His church, it is often His manner, in the first place, so to order things in His providence as to show His church their great need of it, and to bring them into distress for want of it, and so put them upon crying earnestly to Him for it.

R.A. Torrey:

We are too busy to pray, so we are too busy to have power. We have a great deal of activity, but we accomplish little; many services, but few conversions; much machinery, but few results.

Leonard Ravenhill:

This much is sure in all churches, forgetting party labels; the smallest meeting numerically is the prayer meeting. If weak in prayer, we are weak everywhere.

And then John Piper:

It is as though the Field Commander (Jesus) called in the troops, gave them a crucial mission (“Go and bear fruit”), handed each of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the General’s headquarters and said, “Comrades, the General has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end He has authorized Me to give each of you personal access to Him through these transmitters. If you stay true to His mission and seek His victory first, He will always be as close as your transmitter, to give tactical advice and to send in air cover when you or your comrades need it.

Just a moment of confession here. I don't think this is an area where I've excelled as a pastor. Even a few months ago, through some time with our brothers and sisters in South Korea, the Lord really brought a lot of conviction to my own heart on this. I came back and said, "Here in our church, we need to pray more."

This church I visited in South Korea gathers every single morning at 5:00 for a prayer meeting. Every single morning. Every Friday night they gather all night for prayer. I'd never been part of an all-night prayer gathering. So I came back and said, "We're doing this." So we had an all-night prayer gathering in January. We did another 8:00-12:30 in March. These were awesome times. The Lord is teaching me, and I think us here, about prayer. I just think we have a lot to learn here. So if we want to see what they saw in the New Testament—which I think we want to see—then it's going to start on our faces before God.

God, help us pray in ways that show we're totally dependent on Your power, desperate for Your grace and dedicated to Your mission. Make us praying churches.

96. ACTS 4: PRAYER AMIDST PERSECUTION

When the early Christians first started to face persecution, the first thing they did was pray. They lifted their voices together to God and prayed (4:23-31).

Why Do We Pray for the Persecuted Church?

So as we pray, especially for the persecuted church, why do we pray for them? **Because we are one family.** "*If one member suffers, all suffer together*" (1 Corinthians 12:26). We have Somali brothers and sisters—they're our family. God tells us, "*Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body*" (Hebrews 13:3). We have one family, and **we have one purpose:** to glorify our Father as His sons and daughters.

Who Do We Pray To?

If you look in Acts 4 at the attributes of God, He is **the One Who is sovereign over the world** (Psalm 24:1), **the One Who is always faithful to His Word** (John 14:12-14, 1:7-8) and **the One Who is familiar with suffering.**

What Do We Pray For?

According to Acts 4, amidst persecution the early church prayed **for the honor of Christ, the boldness of the church and the advancement of His Kingdom.**

What Should We Expect When We Pray?

Based on Acts 4, we should **expect the Spirit to fill** and **expect the gospel to succeed** (Acts 5:12-14, 41-42) and go forward. Mark this down. Christian suffering is inevitable. That means followers of Christ who proclaim the gospel will suffer in this world—guaranteed. Yet Christian mission is unstoppable. The spread of the gospel through the church cannot be stopped. Satan’s strategies to stop the church ultimately serve to spread the church.

Here’s what I mean by that. Think about the end of Acts 7. Stephen is stoned, as the first Christian martyr in the church. Satan is thinking, “Win for me.” But what happens right after that? The church scatters and “*those we were scattered went about preaching the word*” (Acts 8:4). Acts 11:19-21 says they started preaching the word in Antioch and started a church there—a church that in Acts 13 ends up sending out the first two missionaries for the spread of the gospel in the Roman Empire. One of those missionaries is named Paul, who by the way used to be named Saul who was responsible for the stoning of Stephen.

So follow this. Saul, a persecutor of Christians in Acts 7, ends up stoning Stephen, which leads to the spread of the gospel in Antioch, which one day results in a church there sending out Saul, now Paul, as a missionary. You can’t write any script better than this. Satan’s strategies to stop the church ultimately serve to spread the church, because our God is sovereign. We pray then for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Somalia and elsewhere.

God, we pray for the honor of Christ, for the boldness of Your church and for the advancement of Your Kingdom amidst our brothers and sisters. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

97. ACTS 9: PRAYER FOR RESURRECTION

This is a pretty straightforward story of Dorcas (also known as Tabitha) dying, Peter praying then Dorcas coming back to life. **Through prayer, Dorcas physically goes from death to life**. Just like we’d seen in Jesus’ ministry, (John 5;8-9; Mark 5:40-42) as a result of Dorcas physically coming back to life, **many spiritually go from death to life**.

98. ACTS 10-11: PRAYERS OF ALL PEOPLES.

This is a turning point in the story of Acts. Up until this point the gospel has really only gone to Jews, but now the gospel starts to spread to non-Jews, to Gentiles, to the nations. The churches realize that **God hears the prayers of all peoples**, including Cornelius, a Gentile centurion (10:1-8). And **God**

grants salvation to all peoples. Acts 11:18, *“And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”*

99. ACTS 12: PRAYER FOR THE IMPRISONED

Acts 12 gives us a picture of prayer for the imprisoned where we learn that **prayer to God is surprisingly powerful**. We’ve got to read this story in Acts 12:6-17 to see what happens when the church prays. *“Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.”* I love this. Peter was sleeping. He was not devising a jail break. He wasn’t working with Chuck Norris on a plan to break out. The peace of God was with him in the middle of prison.

“And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And the chains fell off his hands.” Picture this. An angel shows up, there’s a shining light. What does Peter do? He’s still sleeping. So the angel strikes Peter on the side. *“And the angel said to him, ‘Dress yourself and put on your sandals.’ And he did so. And he said to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’”* We don’t want Peter going naked into the streets.

And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself...

I love that. *“When Peter came to himself...”* That’s why we love Peter, right? He’s so slow. He’s been woken up by an angel, told to put on his clothes, led outside through numerous guards, gates have been opened up for him, he’s now freely walking the streets...and then Peter came to himself. *“He said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’”*

Then it gets better as he goes to the church:

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter’s voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.

Don’t you love Rhoda? Put yourself in Peter’s shoes. You now realize you’re an escaped prisoner, you head for this particular house before anybody sees you, you’re looking over your shoulder to make sure nobody sees you and you finally get to the house. You start knocking frantically, Rhoda

comes to the door. “Who is it?” she asks. “It’s Peter,” he says. “Let me in quick.” And she’s so excited she leaves him standing at the door. She goes back in and tells them, “Peter’s out of prison!”

Listen to what they say: *“They said to her, ‘You are out of your mind.’”* Imagine that conversation. “Be quiet, Rhoda. You’re interrupting our prayers. We’re praying that Pete will get out of prison. Be quiet.” *“But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, ‘It is his angel!’”* Meanwhile, Peter, still the escaped prisoner outside the door, *“continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.”* Ha! Maybe Rhoda was right.

But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.

What a great story! A jail break as evidence of the power of God in prayer.

In the words of Thomas Watson, “The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.”

At the end of this story we see that **the Word of God is completely unstoppable**. Herod is the one who ends up dying and the Word of God keeps moving forward (12:20-24).

100. ACTS 13: CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH FASTING AND PRAYER

Acts 13 opens with these words:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 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.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

This passage describes the setting apart and the sending of the first missionaries from the church, deliberately going out into places where the gospel had not yet gone with the intention of making disciples and multiplying the church. And it all started with prayer and fasting. See how this works here.

Prayer and fasting unite us around the Word of God, as it did with all these different people from diverse backgrounds in Antioch.

Prayer and fasting focus us on the glory of God. As they pray and fast, they’re worshipping God.

Prayer and fasting sensitize us to the Spirit of God. As they pray and fast, the Holy Spirit speaks to them and says, “Set apart Saul and Barnabas for this work.”

And in this, **prayer and fasting lead to the mission of God**.

Realize what just happened. We just read about a prayer and fasting meeting that united a missions movement that in the days to come would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries. And 2,000 years after that prayer meeting, over a billion Christians bear witness to Christ in almost every country in the world. Thirteen of our 29 books in the New Testament were the result of the ministry that was launched in that moment of prayer and fasting. Don't underestimate the importance of a church praying and fasting together.

Much like we did with PRAY, I want to give you an acrostic for FAST. I hope this will help you remember what fasting is about and how it plays out practically.

We'll start with **F—Focus on God**.

I mean to emphasize two things here. One is what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:16-17. We don't do this so others will think we're spiritual. We do this to honor God. That doesn't mean nobody else can know we're fasting. Sometimes we actually fast with others. But the reason for fasting is to focus on God, not to draw attention to ourselves. It also means to feast on God. That's the point of fasting: we're saying more than we need anything in this world, even the basic daily necessity of food, we need and long for God.

That means **A—Abstain from food**. Sometimes people say, "Well, can't I just maybe fast from technology or fast from this or that?" If God leads you to do those sorts of things, that's great. But think about fasting specifically as being tied to a God-given addiction. God has wired us to be addicted to food. We wake up in the morning and we want food. So in a way that's different from fasting from technology or TV or Netflix or whatever it might be. We put aside this God-given addiction for food, this basic need we have, and we say, "I have something I need more and that's intimacy with You," and all the other things we're about to summarize here.

I would encourage you to think about fasting primarily when it comes to food. You might not be physically able. I've talked to some people who struggle with a history of eating disorders. If there are significant reasons not to think about food, then yes, think of the best, closest substitute to a God-given addiction like that. But if you are physically able, think about abstaining from food. That's the picture we see in the Bible. People were abstaining from food, not just their phones. Of course, they didn't have phones, but you get the point.

Then **S—Substitute that time with prayer and study**. Think concentrated and continual. At times when we would normally eat, we spend extra time in prayer and in the Word. Then continually, throughout the day, as we have impulses to eat, let those physical impulses drive us to prayer or drive us to the Word. Substitute your mealtimes with prayer and study.

Then **T—"Taste and see that the Lord is good!"** That's a direct quote from Psalm 34:8. Verses nine and ten are also great: "*Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no*

lack...those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” God is honored when we say, “With You, I lack no good thing.”

That’s just the basics. **Focus** on God. **Abstain** from food. **Substitute** the time—both at mealtimes and throughout the day—with prayer and study, as you’re able. And in the process, **Taste** and see that God is good.

Why fast like this? Why is it important that we do this? Why would we periodically put aside food, maybe even food and drink? Why would we set aside a meal—breakfast, lunch or dinner—or maybe even a whole day not to eat, maybe longer than that, a few days, a week or more? Here’s my best attempt to summarize all we’ve seen in God’s Word. Why do we fast? One answer is because we’re hungry for God’s Word in our lives (John 4:31-34). We have food to eat that’s more important than our daily bread. It’s *“every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4).

And we don’t just fast because we’re hungry for God’s Word. We also fast because we’re hungry for God’s power in His church (Psalm 73:25-26; Acts 13:1-4, 14:23). That’s the picture we see associated with prayer and fasting. Just like food is our strength, fasting is saying, “We need strength from You, God.”

We also fast because we’re hungry for God’s glory in all nations. It’s what we read about in Isaiah 62:1-7. Picture this. Whenever we set aside a meal or a day or however long, and we don’t eat, that’s a physical expression of a spiritual reality. We say, “I’m hungry for something greater, deeper than a sandwich. I’m hungry for God’s Word in my life, God’s power in His church and God’s glory among the nations.

We also fast to express our delight in God’s goodness (Psalm 63:1-8). Psalm 63:5 says, *“My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.”* More than we enjoy food, we enjoy God. This is a physical expression that says more than we enjoy lunch, we enjoy God. We put aside lunch or meals for a day; we pray and read the Word instead of eating. We’re saying, “More than I enjoy that food, I just enjoy You, O God. You are more enjoyable than food.” This is why I love the picture in Zechariah 8:19 where it says fasting is feasting—feasting on God instead of food.

In fasting, we confess our need for God’s grace (Joel 1:14, 2:15-16). Throughout the Old Testament, we saw a relationship between fasting and the need for confession and repentance in our lives and in the church. In fasting, we’re saying more than we need a meal, we need God’s mercy to cover over our sin (Judges 20:26; Ezra 10:6). So periodically, we fast. We ask God to purge impurity from our hearts, to cover over our sinful tendencies with His mercy and grace. When you are struggling with a particular sin in your life, or when we’re confessing sin as a church, then it’s good to fast over that, to seek and submit to God’s will.

Oftentimes God's people fasted in Scripture when a decision needed to be made. They were seeking to know what He desired them to do. We see that in Ezra 8:21-23, Nehemiah 1:4, Daniel 9:3. When they needed to know God's will, or they knew God's will but they needed help in obeying it, they fasted. So when we fast, we're saying more than we want our hunger to cease, we want God's Kingdom to come and His will to be done in our lives.

I remember fasting before asking Heather to marry me. I went off and actually spent a weekend in a monastery, which was kind of funny looking back—of course I walked away from that weekend with a longing to be married. But the whole picture was I wanted to have concentrated time in prayer and fasting, just saying, "God, are You leading me to do this?"

As we pray and read the Word, God works through fasting. This is something He's given us.

Then finally, like we saw in Matthew 9:14-15, we fast to anticipate the return of God's Son. We fast because there's an ache and a longing, a hunger inside of us. Christ is not here as fully and intimately and powerfully and gloriously as we want Him to be. We want more. We want His fullness with us. So fasting is a physical expression that says more than our stomachs long to be full, our souls long to see Christ (Revelation 22:20). John Piper has said, "Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God."

So put all this together. When you set aside food, a meal, a day, whatever, and your stomach is craving something to eat, that physical craving in you then triggers a spiritual impulse, so you say to yourself and to God, "More than I want food right now, I want You, God. I do want food right now, but more than that, I want You. I want Your Word. I want to see Your power. I want to see Your glory. More than I need food right now, I need You, God. I need You more than anything in this world. Anything. I need Your mercy to cover my sin and power for my struggle with sin. I need Your guidance, Your direction, Your wisdom. Ultimately, I long to see You. I long for a fuller intimacy with You, more than I long for anything, including food."

As you focus on God in these ways, you substitute the times you would eat with prayer and time reading His Word, then in the process you experience a far deeper taste of the goodness and glory of God. So let's keep going with some practical questions.

When to fast? D.L. Moody advises us this way: "If you say, 'I will fast when God lays it on my heart,' you never will. You are too cold and indifferent to take the yoke upon you." So I would encourage you to fast, to the extent to which it is physically possible, on a regular basis. I don't know what that needs to mean in your life. It has shifted in my life at different points, but I have a regular routine of fasting and I would exhort you to consider what regular fasting looks like to you.

Then we also fast on special occasions. This might be when you're struggling with a particular sin, when you're making a significant decision or when God burdens your heart with something in

particular. There are times when the church you are part of may fast together. But have a regular routine of fasting that's supplemented by special occasions.

That leads to the question: **who fasts?** Based on what we've seen in Scripture, I would encourage you to think along all these lines. Certainly individuals, so personally in your life. What is your plan for fasting? Then families. I think it's more than appropriate for a family or a couple walking through a decision together to fast. Heather and I have done this at different points. I think about small groups, brothers and sisters with whom you're sharing life in Christ. I think of groups of guys I've fasted with at different points, then we get together to break the fast and share about how it went and what God taught us.

Certainly it's good for the church to fast together at different times, much like solemn assemblies or celebrations in the church. One of the things I hope we'll do here at McLean is to set aside days later in the year for fasting and prayer, just like Acts 13. Days when we fast and ask God, "Are You setting apart any of us to go to places where the gospel has not yet gone," then see how God moves as we pray and fast.

It's certainly appropriate for believers to fast together across countries in different ways. Arthur Pierson has said, "There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer." We would be wise to explore all these potential audiences in fasting.

Next, **how to fast**. What does fasting involve physically? I want to make a major disclaimer here. I am not a medical doctor. I do not know your medical condition. So I would certainly recommend that you speak to your doctor about this, sharing how you really want to do this to honor God and His Word, but you also want to make sure to honor God with the mind and body He's given you. So I'm just going to offer some general principles here, but I am not your doctor and I don't know your body specifically.

I would encourage you to begin small, as in one meal or one day. Barring particular health concerns, it should be a pretty simple step for most people. Donald Whitney says:

It's silly when you put it in perspective. We think about missing a meal or two for the sake of becoming more like Jesus and we get anxious. And yet we willingly miss meals sometimes while shopping, working, recreating, or otherwise occupied. Whenever we believe another activity is at that moment more important, we will go without food fearlessly and without complaint. We need to learn that there are times when it can be not only more important, but much more rewarding to feast on God than food.

Start small. There's no need to make your first fast a week-long one. Start small, and then progress slowly. Go from a day to maybe three days, then maybe to seven days or more.

Also, set parameters from the start. **What will you drink?** Will you drink water only, or water and fresh juices? Maybe a watery soup or broth? Part of this will depend on how long you go. But the

reason to set parameters from the start is because you'll be tempted along the way to expand those parameters, so it's better to have a plan and do your best to stick to it.

Also, identify **when you will eat**. Set a goal—when are you going to break that fast? Then pray for grace, because you will be tempted to stop well short of that goal.

Plan your time intentionally. How will you substitute that time when you normally eat with prayer and time in God's Word? It's not just not eating; it's what you do with those times you would be eating.

Coordinate with others humbly. This means, as much as possible you want this to be between you and the Lord, unless you're participating with others in this fast. But even then, keep the circle of people who know you're fasting as limited as possible. Often you'll be in meal situations with others who know you're fasting. There's no need to draw attention to that. Just politely say, "I'm not eating right now." Obviously, if someone asks, "Why not?" you don't need to lie. But keep your focus on God.

As you fast, appreciate the physical cleansing. There can be physical benefits from fasting, which is great, but that's not the point. It's possible to fast and miss the whole point. "There's more to biblical fasting than abstaining from food," Donald Whitney says. "Without a spiritual purpose for your fast it's just a weight-loss fast. And without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable self-centered experience." That's so true.

So appreciate physical cleansing but prioritize spiritual cleansing. Confess your sins, struggles, fears, frustrations, dissatisfactions and discontentment. All these things will rise to the surface as you fast. Our bodies are used to escaping in a good meal. Fasting reveals how much we look forward to food to get our minds off something and to satisfy us. Fasting forces us to face what's on our minds, seeking Someone else for satisfaction.

You also can examine your use of time and use of money. Let fasting uncover worldly desires and worldly distractions. John Piper writes:

Fasting brings up out of the dark places of my soul the dissatisfactions in relationships, the frustrations of the ministry, the fears of failure, the emptiness of wasted time. And just when my heart begins to retreat to the delicious hope of eating supper with friends... fasting quietly reminds me, not tonight.

The hope of food gave you the good feelings to balance out the bad feelings. But now the balance is off. You must find another way to deal with it.

As you fast, expect discomfort or hunger pangs. It won't feel good physically. Potential side effects include weariness, coldness, bad breath, body odor, headaches, stomach aches and dizziness. There are also a variety of potential emotional side effects, including impatience and irritability. As soon as you experience discomfort or hunger pangs, employ those feelings. In other words, let them drive you to God. When you think, "I really want some food right now," let it drive you to pray, "God, I want You

more. Help me to want You more. Help me to want Your Word more. Help me to want Your glory among the nations more.” Let these relatively minor pains drive you to focus on urgent physical and spiritual needs. Obviously you’re not starving yourself physically, but fasting can be a good reminder that there are many people—including many of our brothers and sisters in Christ—who are in urgent physical need. There are many people who are starving without the gospel. Over two billion people have little to no knowledge of it. So employ this physical void in your life to pray and plead for people who have urgent physical and spiritual voids in their lives.

Prepare for fasting wisely. Read up on the wisdom of what you should eat before fasting, especially if you're doing a more extended fast.

Also, break your fast lightly. Especially if you’ve gone for a while, start with soup, fresh vegetables, then fruit, then introduce meats, dairy, fats and oils days later and in small amounts. Your stomach will thank you for it.

My aim is that by this point, barring clear doctor’s orders or physical reasons for not fasting, you would have all you need to start fasting regularly in your life this next week. I would just ask, what are you waiting for? Jesus says, “When you fast...” —not if. So start small, then progress from there. I want to exhort you, based on the whole of God’s Word, to integrate fasting as a regular part of your pursuit of God, so that it would be just as basic to you as praying and giving.

God, I pray we would not just be hearers of Your Word, but doers. You’ve shown us the importance of and the reasons for fasting and the history of Your people fasting. So I pray for every single one of us, including myself, that we would take what we have seen and heard from Your Word and put it into practice. I pray for tens of thousands of people who are listening right now, that through fasting in their lives You would draw us into deeper delight in You, in Your Word, in Your mercy, as we long for the coming of Christ and Your Kingdom. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

101. ACTS 13-14: PRAYING FOR MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas go out as missionaries in Acts 13-14 on their first missionary journey and there’s so much we can see about how to pray for missionaries today who are doing the same thing. They’re going places where the gospel has not yet gone and we can pray almost word for word for them from these verses. I’ve include about 16 ways to pray for missionaries here. Let’s do that. Picture the faces of missionaries—maybe the names of people you know. If you don’t know people who have gone out, pray for missionaries who have been sent out for the spread of the gospel where others have not gone.

Pray that they would be confident in God’s Word (13:4-5).

Pray that they would be filled with His Spirit (13:6-9).

Pray for their victory in spiritual warfare (13:10-12).

Pray for their success in gospel witness.

Pray for peace with other believers (13:13).

Pray for favor with unbelievers (13:14-15).

Pray that the gospel will be clear through them (13:42-47).

Pray that God will open hearts around them (13:48-52).

Pray for their joy in the midst of suffering (14:1-2).

Pray for their kindness in the midst of slander (14:3).

Pray for supernatural power to accompany them.

Pray for Christlike humility to characterize them (14:1-18).

Pray for their patience and perseverance (14:19-20).

God, we pray that You would **use them to make disciples (14:21-23)** and **to multiply churches (14:24-28)**. God, may it be so, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

102. ACTS 14: PRAYER, FASTING, CHURCH PLANTING AND PASTORS

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23). This is so key. **Church planters start the church through prayer and fasting, they commit elders/pastors to God with prayer and fasting, then the elders/pastors shepherd the church through prayer and fasting.** In the words of Charlie Dates, “It is our (the pastors’) responsibility to talk to God on behalf of the people and to turn around and talk to the people on behalf of God.”

Consider a few more quotes on this:

The enemy uses all his power to lead the Christian, and above all the minister, to neglect prayer. He knows that however admirable the sermon may be, however attractive the service, however faithful the pastoral visitation, none of these things can damage him or his kingdom if prayer is neglected. – Andrew Murray

A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more. – John Owen

Because prayer for the church is secret and therefore unrewarded by men, we shall only undertake it if we long for their spiritual warfare more than for their thanks. – John Stott

God, help every pastor and church planter among us, including myself, to lead the church through prayer and fasting. In Jesus' name. Amen.

103. ACTS 16: HOW DO I KNOW GOD’S WILL FOR MY LIFE? (Part 1)

In the Old Testament, people inquired of the Lord, “Do I do this or that?” But how does this work in our lives? This is why I love Acts 16:6-10:

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

This is a pretty pivotal moment in the New Testament when the Spirit of God stops Paul from going over there and tells Paul to go this way instead. This was a huge turning point in the book of Acts. The question is how did that happen? How did the Spirit of Jesus not allow them to go? This is where I want to encourage us that when it comes to discerning God’s will in our lives, what is God’s Word teaching us here.

Follow this. **As we walk with God, He directs the details of our lives** (16:11-18, 25-34). How did Paul know when and where to go? The text really doesn’t say how the Lord did this, but we know God was leading them, and God was leading them as they were walking with God in obedience to His Word. If you think about it, Paul and Barnabas were going out preaching the gospel, so it was in the context of active obedience to the will of God that they knew from His Word that He led them in a way they did not know.

Often we sit back and say, “What do You want me to do?” Then we just kind of wait. Instead, we should walk in what we know and God will lead us in the things we don’t know. If you want to know the will of God, walk in obedience to the Word of God (Proverbs 3:5-6; Romans 12:1-2). We know it’s God’s will to be in prayer, to abide in His Word, to read and memorize and study it. It’s God’s will to fast. All these things we’ve talked about tonight.

It’s His will that we pursue righteousness and holiness, fleeing immorality and idolatry. We are to love Him with everything we have and love our neighbors as ourselves. We are to care for the needy, defend the weak and help the powerless. We’re to make disciples of the nations. We don’t have to ask God about any of those things—we know these are His will. We don’t have to sit back and wonder, “What is God’s will for my life?”

Oswald Chambers said, “The Christian should never ask the question: what is God’s will for my life?” He used the illustration of walking through the woods, saying, “What’s the only time you have to ask where the path is? It’s when you’re off the path.” So Christian, just stay on the path every day, walking with God in obedience to His Word, and He will lead you. He will guide you. It’s in Proverbs

3:5-6. *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”* He will lead and guide us.

As we walk with God, He directs the details of our lives **for the accomplishment of His will**. But it’s not always in ways we would plan. If you look at the rest of the story in Acts 16, a lot of hard things were happening, including Paul and Silas being thrown into prison. We would say, “The safest place to be is in the center of God’s will.” But it doesn’t sound like it was that way for Paul and Silas. The most dangerous place to be may in some ways be in the center of God’s will. God will direct us in all kinds of ways we may not understand. But here’s the deal. Our lives are surrendered to His will when we say, “Your will be done in my life.” As we walk with God, we can trust that He will direct the details of our lives for the accomplishment of His will and **for the spread of His worship in the world**.

Here’s the key. The question is not, “God, what is Your will for my life?” as if the universe revolves around my life or your life; as if what’s most important is God’s will for each of our lives individually. No, when we understand Acts 16, we realize the question is not, “What is Your will for my life?” The question is, “God, what is Your will in the world and how can I align my life with it?” God’s will in the world is to be exalted as the good, gracious, just, loving Savior-King Who deserves all praise from all peoples in the world. So don’t ask, “How can I find Your will?” It’s not lost. He’s not hiding it from us. He has given it to us.

Instead, ask, “God, how can I align with Your will? How can I, this week, show Your goodness and grace, share Your gospel, show Your justice, show Your love? God, I’m putting aside my agenda, my plans, my ideas, my wants, my will—even my questions about why this or that is happening—and I’m saying this week I want to walk with You and worship You in a way that spreads Your glory among the people around me in my home, work, city and wherever You lead me in the world.”

This is the will of God, brothers and sisters, and there’s no need for you to find it. Your greatest need, my greatest need, is to walk in it and to trust that as we do, God will direct our steps for the accomplishment of His will and the spread of His worship in the world. That happens in the context of abiding in pursuit of God day in and day out. That happens while we are abiding in His Word, praying, fasting and seeking Him.

104. ACTS 20-21: HOW DO I KNOW GOD’S WILL FOR MY LIFE? (Part 2)

In Acts 20-21, we see some disagreement over what God’s will is. I wish we had time to talk about this story in depth, but the basics are these: Paul believes God is leading him to go to Jerusalem, where the likelihood is he’ll be arrested and put in prison or killed. Others, including a prophet named Agabus, are saying that’s exactly what’s going to happen, so the church is encouraging Paul not to go.

Acts says they're all doing this in an effort to follow the Spirit—Paul in his decision to go and the church in their encouragement for him not to go.

What we see here are **three biblical truths**:

First, Spirit-directed Christians sometimes disagree, which we've seen at other points in Scripture (Acts 15:39-40; Romans 14:1-8).

Second, Spirit-led Christians oftentimes suffer. The Spirit of God often leads us into suffering (Acts 20:23; 2 Timothy 3:16).

Truth number three is Spirit-empowered Christians never need to fear, because God holds our lives in His hands and we are secure in Him.

As we seek to discern God's will in our lives, I would encourage with these **four pastoral encouragements**:

First, hold confidently to the Word of God. This is the only certain way to know God's will. Walk according to it, hold fast to it and put it far higher than any counsel you ever get from anybody else or any word you ever hear from anybody else. This Word is supreme. Hold confidently to the Word of God.

Pray continually in the Spirit of God. "*Praying at all times in the Spirit*" (Ephesians 6:18) and "*in the Holy Spirit*" (Jude 20).

Then listen closely to the people of God. So yes, seek good, wise, godly counsel from brothers and sisters who are holding confidently in God's Word and praying continually in God's Spirit.

Then as the Lord leads by His Spirit through His Word with counsel, take risks for the gospel of God (Acts 28:30-31). Don't assume because it's risky that means it's not from God. God is calling you and me to take all kinds of risks and if we're not careful, we can easily create a comfortable, cozy version of Christianity that never takes risks for the sake of the gospel in the world—safe, sheltered faith that always avoids risks in our lives, in our families and in the church. If that's the case, we will miss the reason we're on earth. "*I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God*" (Acts 20:24).

God, may it be said of our lives that we did not account our lives of any value, nor as precious to us, if only we may finish the course and run the race we have received from You, to testify to the gospel of Your grace wherever and however You lead us in this world. May it be so, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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