



Be With Jesus | Fasting

A Praying Response

February 28, 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 69:9-16 (Lily)

I love you more than I can say.
Because I'm madly in love with you,
They blame me for everything they dislike about you.

When I poured myself out in **prayer and fasting**,
All it got me was more contempt.

When I put on a sad face,
They treated me like a clown.

Now drunks and gluttons
Make up drinking songs about me.

And me? I pray.
GOD, it's time for a break!

God, answer in love!
Answer with your sure salvation!

Don't let the swamp be my grave, the Black Hole
Swallow me, its jaws clenched around me.

Now answer me, GOD, because you love me;
Let me see your great mercy full-face.

INTRODUCTION TO STORIES |

For those new to our faith family and those joining us for the first time today, it would be helpful to know a couple of things. Every few months in our faith family rhythms, we use our Gathering time to focus on particular practices or habits that help us follow Jesus in our ordinary roles and relationships. As disciples or apprentices of Jesus, our daily, weekly, yearly, individual, and collective rhythms orbit around being with Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and doing what Jesus did. And today, we are in the second week of focusing on fasting as a practice to help us be with Jesus.

So, we will say some things about fasting that might spark your curiosity, but then we'll move on without explanation, but that's because we talked about it last week. So, while you won't need to have participated last week to get what we are doing this week, it might help if you go back and listen at some point.

Second, in our practical focus on following Jesus, we like to actually practice the habit together in these Sunday morning settings. Fasting requires a little more coordination than just showing up and starting. While we are fasting together in Gospel Community and DNA groups, today, we will share some stories of fasting experiences. Stories from scripture and our faith family meant to encourage us to be/become people who fast.

Before we look deeper into the practice of fasting this morning, let's listen. I've asked Scott Nance to kick things off for us.

PRE-SERMON READING #1 | Acts 13:1-3 (Scott)

The congregation in Antioch was blessed with a number of prophet-preachers and teachers:

Barnabas
Simon, nicknamed Niger,
Lucius the Cyrenian,
Manaen, an advisor of the ruler Herod, and
Saul.

One day as they were **worshipping God**—ministering to God on behalf of the community— **and fasting**, the *Holy Spirit* spoke: ‘Take Barnabas and Saul and commission them for the work I have called them to do.’

So they commissioned them. In that circle of intensity and obedience, of **fasting and praying**, they laid hands on their heads and sent them off.

Fasting Experience #1 | Rachel

PRE-SERMON READING #2 | Luke 2:21-22, 25, 27, 36-38 (Rori)

When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived.

Then when the days stipulated by Moses for purification were complete, Mary and Joseph took baby Jesus up to Jerusalem to offer him to God as commanded in God’s Law...

In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the *Holy Spirit* was on him...Led by the Spirit he entered the Temple.

Anna the prophetess was also there, a daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was by now a very old woman. She had been married seven years and a widow for eighty-four. She never left the Temple area, **worshipping** night and day **with her fasting and prayers**.

At the very time Simeon was praying over Jesus, she showed up, broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem.

Fasting Experience #2 | Dan

SERMON | Recap & Connecting

Maybe our fasting experience has felt a bit like the psalmist who Lily quoted for us at the beginning of the Gathering. We pour out our energy by fasting, and all we get is a poor-looking complexion, people frustrated with “hangriness,” and feeling clownish in our efforts. Hopefully not! But the reality, as we saw last week, is that fasting doesn’t always get us what we want, but it does help us experience what we need: **full-faced mercy.**

Remember what we observed last week, the Bible and Jesus assume that **fasting is a natural element of lived faith and that we who are living by faith would fast.** Unlike the current use of the word, fasting in our scriptures refers to **choosing not to eat food or (sometimes, but rarely) drink water for a set time.**

We see in nearly every fast in the Bible that people were drawn into fasting. That fasting biblically and historically **is an organic, biological reaction to a “grievous sacred moment”¹ by those hungering and thirsting for righteousness** (Matt. 5:6). That is to say; fasting is *a natural response* to those longing to relate rightly with God and others when at a particular moment something about those relationships is out of whack. When the weight is off balance, and we can *feel* it.

“grievous sacred moments” are times in our lives when we can *feel* the weight of the world (internally or externally or both), moments when the gravity of a situation is inescapable. **These are emotional moments, moments where desires and feelings unrequited or painfully exposed overpower our stomachs.**

In these moments, we *feel* as if food is not appropriate (our body doesn’t even crave it). **Our body's ache joins with the anguish of our emotions and mind and spirit for righteousness, for the restoring of right relations.** In fasting, we are **not suppressing our appetites but are moved by our emotions, feelings, and desires into the natural bodily response that unites us with God.**

The word we use to describe the seat of our emotions, desires, and feelings is “heart.” In Hebrew, the word we translate heart is often the word for “gut” or “abdomen,” connecting our bodily appetites with the appetites that drive us. **Fasting, therefore, is a gut response of the heart.**

FASTING’S CHIEF COMPANION | Prayer

Today, we’ll look at what we do while we are fasting from food. The chief companion of fasting is *prayer*. Like the psalm and readings from Luke and Acts (thanks Scott & Rori!) and as we heard from Rachel and Dan (thank you two!), fasting and prayer seem to go hand in hand. The intimate connection of prayer with fasting makes sense since fasting is **a natural reaction in the organic process of maturation as humans in relation to God and others.**

¹ Scot McKnight, *Fasting*, xviii-xix, 166-167.

When we willingly forgo the satisfying or appeasing of our bodily appetites for a period of time, our emotions, feelings, and desires (i.e., heart) actually take us to the eternally good rather than driving us to only temporal gratification. **Fasting is a natural response that helps us mature emotionally and spiritually (i.e., being ones who choose the good). Therein, becoming ones who instinctually live in the character of Jesus.** Which is what we are after as his apprentices, right?!

And what is ultimately good is a life in union with God. A life in which we are in a responsive relationship through shared communication with our heavenly Father. And what is this responsive, shared communication? Well, prayer!

So it is not a stretch to say that the act of fasting itself is a form of whole-body prayer: our mind, spirit, heart, and body unified in our communion with God. Fasting is shared communication of our desires with God's desires—and not just the additional time spent in communication with God when we would otherwise be eating (though that is not bad).

The reality is when we choose to fast, we are choosing to press into our relationship with God, to be vulnerable and candid (exposing our hearts) during emotional, often grievous, sacred moments, which naturally leads us to prayer.

So, the question is, “What do we pray during fasting?”

PRAYING AND FASTING | Praise & Petition

Our scriptures give us two primary prayerful responses during fasting: Praise & Petitions for Peace.

Remember fasting helps us to become ones who instinctually choose what is good (i.e., loving our enemy and praying for one who persecutes us (like David did in Psalm 35), even though our environment and hearts would encourage us to choose something different (i.e., love only those who are like you and hate your enemies).

When we are led into fasting because of a particular sacred moment, we pray out of a desire or craving for what is true and good to be manifest in that specific situation. Prayer out of a desire for what is true and good is most often expressed in prayers of praise and petitions for peace.

HOW WE PRAY WHILE FASTING

- Praise
- Petitions for Peace

We heard this combination in the stories of Anna in Luke and the faith family at Antioch. In both stories, we see people worshiping and fasting and fasting and praying. In Anna's case, she was worshiping and fasting for Jerusalem's redemption—her sacred moment was the absence of God among his people. Therefore, she longed for, desired, craved the relationship to be made whole (true and good). So moved by her hunger and thirst for the relationship between God and his people to be restored, **Anna worshiped through fasting, praying for peace.**

In the Antioch leadership case, they were worshiping, “ministering to God,” and fasting on behalf of the community. They were led to fast out of a desire for those who were not relating with God rightly (or at all). Some out of ignorance, others out of arrogance. And in their fasting, the Lord led them to his heart for the nations and made it clear what to do with that shared heart.

In both stories, we are told they were worshiping and fasting. Donald Whitney² contends that:

While we often associate “fasting only with dire circumstances and great troubles...the Bible also says that fasting may be an act of sheer devotion to God.

Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God [and longing for others to experience that pleasure as well. Leading you to] sublimate (divert or modify) [your desires] to those of the Spirit.

Christians throughout history have fasted [and prayed] for this purpose...in addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God, [fasting is]...intended to help the person focus on adoring the One who [you are in a relationship with].

[You can call this] fasting to express love and worship to God [which always spills over in love for others].

The stories of Anna and Antioch depict people being led into fasting (a bodily ache) because their hearts, minds, and spirits ached for right relating to God for their people, themselves, and even those who did not yet know that God was what they needed most. Through their fasting, they worshiped (praised, adored) the God who drew them into relationship and aligned their desires with his desires and will.

So, when we fast, we praise. When we pray in our fasting, we are not just seeking God to get something or to change something; we worship God, adoring God, which will lead us into petition and expands what we long for to a love for others.

Out of the prayers of adoration in fasting come the prayers aligned with our Father’s will: petitions for peace. We see this most clearly in Zechariah 7 and 8.

7:1-14

On the fourth day of the ninth month, in the fourth year of the reign of King Darius, God’s Message again came to Zechariah.

The town of Bethel had sent a delegation headed by Sarezar and Regem-Melech to pray for God’s blessing and to confer with the priests of the Temple of God-of-the-Angel-Armies, and also with the prophets. They posed this question: “Should we plan for a day of mourning and abstinence next August, the seventieth anniversary of Jerusalem’s fall, as we have been doing all these years?”

² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life*, 176.

The people of God had been in exile, with Jerusalem destroyed for seventy years. During this time, they initiated a handful of fasts to mourn what was lost, what was broken in their identity to God and land and one another. But as we'll see, their regular fasting was less a hunger and thirst in unison with what God craved but more oriented around favor for themselves. Let's keep reading. Verse 4:

God-of-the-Angel-Armies gave me this Message for them, for all the people and for the priests: "When you held days of fasting every fifth and seventh month all these seventy years, **was it for me that you fasted?** And when you held feasts, filling your stomachs, was that for me? Hardly. You're interested in religion; I'm interested in people.

In other words, their fasting was not an act of worship, a whole-body communion with God that led them to adoration or to seek God's will, to make petitions for peace, for our Father's kingdom to come and will to be done in and through them on earth as he desires it. They fasted out of mathematical or magical expectations, religion, not relationship, which is not what God has ever been after. Verse 7:

"There's nothing new to say on the subject...the message hasn't changed. God-of-the-Angel-Armies said then and says now:

"Treat one another justly.

Love your neighbors.

Be compassionate with each other.

Don't take advantage of widows, orphans, visitors, and the poor.

Don't plot and scheme **in your heart** against one another—that's evil.'

"But did your ancestors listen? No, they set their jaws in defiance. They shut their ears. **They stole themselves—made their hearts diamond-hard—against God's revelation and the Spirit-filled sermons** preached by the earlier prophets by order of God-of-the-Angel-Armies. And God became angry, really angry, because he told them everything plainly and they wouldn't listen to a word he said.

"So [this is what God-of-the-Angel-Armies said] if they won't listen to me, I won't listen to them. I scattered them to the four winds. They ended up strangers wherever they were. Their 'promised land' became a vacant lot—weeds and tin cans and thistles. Not a sign of life. They turned a dreamland into a wasteland."

As we saw last week in Isaiah, the heart of the fast was off-beat from the heart of God. In fact, their fasting without worship and praying with the Father's will only increased the divide. Their fasting was not a response to this out-of-whack rhythm, but rather a religious act done in hopes to achieve something, to get something they craved but was less than what they actually needed.

But never fret; our Father longs for restoration, for alignment, for wholeness even more than we do. Let's jump into chapter 8, starting in verse 14:

8:14-23

A Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies:

“In the same way that I decided to punish you when your ancestors made me angry, and didn’t pull my punches, at this time I’ve decided to bless Jerusalem and the country of Judah. Don’t be afraid. And now here’s what I want you to do: Tell the truth, the whole truth, when you speak. Do the right thing by one another, both personally and in your courts. **Make for peace.** Don’t cook up plans **in your heart** to take unfair advantage of others. Don’t do or say what isn’t so. I hate all that stuff. Keep your lives simple and honest.” Decree of God.

Don’t be afraid; God will do the restoring! He will satisfy the need and craving which gnaws at you. What he wants us to do is “Make for peace,” be “peacemakers,” as Jesus called us (Matt. 5:9); by letting our hearts come into rhythm with his. After all, this is the nature of fasting.

What we do while fasting is pray (praise and petition) and make peace. But notice the flow of how we become peacemakers, that it is through **worship!** Keep reading in verse 18:

Again I received a Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies:

“The days of fasting and mourning set for the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months will be turned into days of feasting for Judah—celebration and holiday. **Embrace truth! Love peace!**”

From fasting to feasting! Take the religious acts you are using to get what you want (even if you think they are what God wants or you want what God wants) and instead feast! Worship, celebrate, adore God! **From adoration comes an embrace of what is true (that what we need most is God-with-us, God-for-us) and a love for peace (for wholeness). In worship, our hearts, appetites are tuned into what God is after, the good” that we talked about earlier!**

And here’s the thing, **when our fasting is full of praise that leads to petitions for peace and into actions of making for peace, the world we inhabit changes.** Verse 20:

A Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies:

“People and their leaders will come from all over to see what’s going on. The leaders will confer with one another: ‘Shouldn’t we try to get in on this? Get in on God’s blessings? Pray to God-of-the-Angel-Armies? What’s keeping us? Let’s go!’

“Lots of people, powerful nations—they’ll come to Jerusalem looking for what they can get from God-of-the-Angel-Armies, looking to get a blessing from God.”

A Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies:

“At that time, ten men speaking a variety of languages will grab the sleeve of one Jew, hold tight, and say, ‘Let us go with you. We’ve heard that **God is with you.**’”

God is with you, the very thing we are after, and the exact thing that our friends and neighbors and enemies need most desperately as well. Truly, the only good that will satisfy is life at peace with God and one another.

WHAT WE DO WHILE FASTING

- Praise
- Petition for Peace.
- Be Peacemakers**

So, what do we do while we fast, as the Spirit leads us to respond to a particular sacred moment? **We praise (adore) and petition (plead in-step with God’s will) and make peace (in our everyday roles and relationships).**

Let’s pray.

COMMUNION READING | Psalm 63:1-8 (Reagan)

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where
there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than
life,
my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.

My soul will be satisfied as with fat and
rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with
joyful lips,

when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches
of the night;

for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I
will sing for joy.

My soul clings to you,
your right hand upholds me.

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION

O Heavenly Father, give us a heart like the heart of Jesus, a heart more ready to serve than be served, a heart moved by compassion towards the weak and oppressed, a heart, mind, soul, and body set upon the coming of Your kingdom in the world of women and men.

We recognize that Jesus showed particular concern and care for those in need, of whom we can each be named:

Those needing food or drink or clothes;

The sick and all those wasted by disease of the body, of the mind, and of the soul;

The blind, physically and spiritually ;

The disabled;

People suffering from life-shattering diseases;

Prisoners in cells made of bars, cells made of fear, and cells made of pride;

The homeless and all the lost sheep of our society;

Victims of sexual exploitation and abuse;

The lonely;

The single parents;

The worried and the anxious;

Those who are living faithful lives in obscurity;

Those who are fighting bravely for unpopular causes;

Those who are working diligently for you throughout your world.

May the grace and mercy we receive now in the body and blood of Jesus freely given to make whole what our sins have divided be shared with his same sacrificial generosity. Let the power of our Lord Jesus Christ be strong within us, and his peace invade our spirit and our world.

Amen