

A Theology of Fasting

Tim Conway | *illbehonest.com*

Our church is designating this week as just a week where we are going to give ourselves to seeking the Lord in a special way. Oftentimes, we call it a week of prayer and fasting. Not that everybody in the whole church fasts for an entire eight days. But during that time, what we want to do is encourage the folks in the church to fast. Meals, days, and oftentimes, when I am encouraging the church and others, we're encouraging the church to give ourselves to this, inevitably, somebody asks - (You asked, right?) Inevitably, somebody asks: What about fasting? How often? (Incomplete thought) This is not useless at all - I mean laying hold on the Lord like this is not. He has heard our prayers again and again and again. We do this, not out of ritual, not out of just tradition. We do this because we lay hold upon the Lord in a special way and the Lord answers. The Lord has blessed us with so many answers to our prayers through the years. He is a God who hears prayer and He has vindicated Himself as that kind of God repeatedly. We talk about fasting. I get questions on a pretty much quarterly basis. Every three months, we try to set aside a week where we give ourselves to some very special praying, fasting, seeking the Lord.

When I use the term fast, questions come up. What is it? What do we fast from? How often? Are you talking about fasting for an entire week? What are you talking about here? How often? What should be the frequency? So what I thought I would do tonight, I think this is a very healthy study, just by way of remembrance. What I want us to do is to just do a topical study tonight on this theme of fasting. Let's look at what Scriptures says. So what I want you to do is to go out of here with a good feeling of what it's all about. You are trying to think about, how often should I do it? And by the way, just because we call special fasting weeks, doesn't mean that Christians can't fast all the time. They can fast on a regular basis. (Incomplete thought) It is not like it is mandatory and legalistically we're forcing everybody to do this. If somebody didn't fast during our week of prayer and fasting, certainly there is no crime in that. But we just want to encourage it. For the sake of unity, have the church really beseeching the Lord in a special way all at one time. When you were out of here today, I really want you to have a feel for this, maybe more than you had when you came in. What's the significance of it? And how often should we do it? And if the church calls a time of special prayer and fasting, should I fast for a meal? Should I fast for a day? Should I try to fast for three consecutive days? Or seven consecutive days? I mean, what is this?

For one, when we talk about fasting, you know what I am talking about. I am talking about abstaining from food as prescribed in our Bibles. And I know that people who don't hold to the Bible fast. People fast for health reasons. People in other religions fast. And I am not talking about fasting just in a generic way. I am talking about fasting as it's found in Scripture. I am talking about God-prescribed fasting. What does it look like? You know, in the New Testament, it is not like there are huge amounts of verses that we can go to. There's a couple of handfuls. So let's look at them. Look at Matthew 4:2. What I want to do is just go through a number of these verses from the New Testament and just see what we can glean from them just in a casual reading. (Incomplete thought) The purpose for this is a theology of fasting. That's what

we can call the message tonight: "A Theology of Fasting." What does God teach us? What is the teaching of God on fasting?

So Matthew 4:2. After I get done with these New Testament passages, I want to look at one in the Old Testament, which I think is very helpful. Matthew 4:2. Jesus - we know that our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for how long? Forty days. Now look, as I was saying on Sunday, you do not want to say: Well, He was God. Or, He is God. He is God. I am not denying the deity of Christ. But I am saying Jesus Christ fasting and his hunger was the fasting and the hunger of a human being. God becoming flesh. God taking upon Himself, robing Himself with mankind in a way, in a manner in which He is like us in every respect, save sin. What I mean by that is his hunger was just as real as yours. And when He fasted, His fasting affected Him just like yours does. You know where I am going with that? It's possible for you to fast for forty days and not die. If you are not accustomed to fasting, you may think one day and you are ready to die. You may think you miss breakfast and get about to three o'clock in the afternoon missing lunch and you are ready to die. There are people that feel that way. You just feel like I can't do this. Jesus Christ fasted for forty days. (Incomplete thought) I know two pastors that just in the last year did forty day-fasts. You can fast for forty days. So if you're wanting to know how long it is even safe? I am not saying go without water for forty days. We'll have another casket up here if you do that. But you know, you can go forty days on water, you can. You can go forty days on juice. My point here is our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for forty days as a man, as one made like us in every respect. I just point that out. And by the way, our Lord was given to fasting. He did it. It was something that was part of His life. At least here. At least when He was being tempted by the devil. We see that He fasted.

Now, let's go to Matthew 6. Matthew 6 has one of the most important texts on fasting in our Bible. Because it is one of the two passages, or one of the two incidents where our Lord gives us instruction - very specific instruction on fasting. Of course, these different accounts can be found in the different synoptic Gospels. But we basically have two accounts. We have His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount here in Matthew 6 and then we have that occasion where the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees came and they asked Him - the disciples of John and the Pharisees fast and your disciples don't fast.

These two passages are Jesus's instruction in the New Testament on fasting. If you want to study the most important passages on this topic. These are the ones you want to look at. He teaches us some very valuable things here. Matthew 6: 16. This has often been said: "When you fast..." "And when you fast..." verse 16. "When you fast..." There is an assumption in the way He says that: "When you fast." When the Lord Jesus Christ looks at us as His followers and He says, "When you fast this is the way I want you to do it." He's definitely implying that He believes that as followers of His, this is something that is going to be characteristic of our lives. "When you fast" doesn't mean you won't fast. When you fast does not mean that it is going to be something that as a Christian that should be foreign to you. "When you fast" means I believe that My followers are going to fast. In fact, His instruction as given to these disciples of John and these disciples of the Pharisees who come to Him and ask Him. We are going to get to that text in a few minutes. He says, "They don't fast now because I am here. I am with them. But when I go, they will fast." Jesus is saying My followers are going to fast. He is not speaking specifically

to His followers there. Although indirectly He does. Here He is, directly to us. He is looking at His disciples.

And you remember. He gathered, Sermon on the Mount. He especially called out His disciples there and He began to teach them. There were crowds behind there. He kind of has the inner group there. And he would say to us: "When you fast..." This is part of the Christian life. "Do not look gloomy like the hypocrites." Okay, He does not want us fasting in a hypocritical manner. In other words, He doesn't want us appearing to be something that we are not. He doesn't want fasting just to be seen by men. He says: "They disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward."

What's their reward? Their reward is that they want to be seen by men and get what they want. They get seen by men. They got what they wanted. They didn't want anything more than that. They fasted to be seen by men. They got seen by men. Everything is good. They got what they wanted. "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face." (Incomplete thought) This doesn't mean that nobody else can ever know that you're fasting. If they do, if they find out then all of a sudden all your fasting is negated. That's not what this means. I mean, look, if you're married, and your wife is cooking meals for you, (Incomplete thought). There's times when you need to communicate with people that you're fasting. I don't believe for us to have a week of prayer and fasting where we kind of know that there is a lot of the one another in the church that are doing this. That's not what this is about. It's got to do with motive here. It's got to do with whether you're doing it to be seen. Motives is the issue here. They do it for a motive. They have a reason. The hypocrite wants to appear to be something. You don't need to flaunt it. When you fast, try to cover it up as much as possible. But you're going to get into situations where you may have to tell somebody or you may have to make it apparent that you are doing that. "When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that you fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret."

In other words, the reason that we're fasting has to do with our Father who sees in secret. When I fast, when you fast, Jesus is assuming we will fast. It is part of the Christian life. What He is pointing out here is you do this in a way, not for the sake of men. Not for them seeing you. You do it because it's got something to do with God the Father. In other words, when you fast, there are implications that have to do with your relationship with the Father. You keep reading here. "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Now there is a textual issue here. Some translations actually add "openly" or "in the open," for everyone to see. It is a textual issue. Whether it is there or not, It does not take away from the fact that God is going to reward you. In other words, we fast, because there is a Fatherly reward in fasting. There are benefits. I want you to see that. Jesus is saying there is a spiritual benefit to fasting. You need to see that. This is not a vain exercise. It's not like, oh, fasting - well that's neat, you know, you tack it on our life. We are not like the hypocrites. You remember how Jesus tells us a story about tax collector and the Pharisee that go to the temple to pray? You remember that story? Luke 18. What does Jesus say about the Pharisee? Well, he began to pray: "God, I thank you I am not like other people and I am not like this and I am not like this tax collector over there. I fast twice in the week."

Let me tell you this, all fasting is not profitable. But there is fasting that's profitable. That's plain from Scripture. There is fasting that doesn't do you any good. There is the hypocrites here

in Matthew 6. All they get is seen by others. That's the end of what they get. (Incomplete thought) You know what's not explicitly said, but is definitely implied through here? Faith. Because you're doing this in secret, which means you believe that God... Remember how it says over in Hebrews 11? We must believe that God is and that He's a rewarder. That's what we have here. The Father rewarding. He is a rewarder of them that seek Him diligently. You know what fasting is? It is one of the things that God has given to us; one of the methods God has given to us of seeking Him. It is turning away from the physical appetites and seeking the Lord in special ways. Turning away from gratifying that physical appetite and seeking the Lord in a very special way. That's what this is for: seeking the Lord. Faith. You do this in secret. You do this when nobody is watching. Because you know God is watching. You know the Father is watching. You know He is there in secret. And you're fasting because you're wanting to lay hold on Him. You want to seek Him.

Let us jump to Matthew 9 now in the other account that I was telling you about where you get the disciples. Matthew tells us it is just disciples of John. The three synoptics kind of present the people that are asking from different perspectives. But in Matthew 9:14, the disciples of John - this is John the Baptist - they come to Him saying: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" I guarantee it is not a good thing to be in one of the first two groups.

You know what? It was okay to be disciples of John at first. But you do not want to stay a disciple of John. You want to make that transition over to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Why? These guys are out of touch. These guys are out of touch with what is happening in this world; what is truly happening. They're out of touch with the significance of Christ - the fact the Messiah has come. The Kingdom of God is at hand. They are out of touch with that. Why? Because, fasting as Jesus teaches us right here, has everything to do with Him. Notice. Jesus said to them in verse 15, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will pass when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast."

Here is what I want you to see. Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? You all see that. Matthew, mourn. This exact account in Mark, chapter 2. You do not have to turn over there. But you know, it does not use the word mourn there. You know what word it uses? You know what word Mark uses? Fast. Mark uses the word fast. Let me just read the Mark account - Mark 2:18-20. "Now John disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to Him: 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'Can the wedding guest fast while the bridegroom is with them?'" As long as they have the bridegroom with them? "They cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, And then they will fast in that day." Mark's account is actually more extensive, more detailed account than what Matthew gives us.

What is very interesting is this: Matthew uses the word mourn in exactly the same place where Mark uses the word fast. Interchangeably. That means they are synonymous. I hope that helps in thinking about what fasting is. Mourning. Why do we mourn? Why would you mourn when the bridegroom is taken away? Because there are longings there. There is desire there. I want Christ back. This is not good. I don't like this. And you know what, we should not be content. This is a healthy discontent. You should not be content to live by faith. Say what? The

Bible says we should live by faith. No! What I mean is you should not be content to stay here and live by faith forever. You should want to see Him face to face. You should want to embrace God. You should want to see Him. You should want to stand in His presence. You should want to walk with Him and talk with Him and fellowship with Him forever. This isn't any good. Well, it is kind of good. It is good if you are a Christian and you are walking with the Lord here. Even the most that Christians experience here is not what we want. We want consummation. This is like we have been betrothed. Who gets engaged and wants to stay engaged forever? That's what we are dealing with here. We don't want this. We don't want to walk by faith, not by sight for eternity. We want to walk by sight. We want to see Him. It doesn't mean we don't trust Him. But we want to see Him; we want to be with Him. We want the veil ripped back.

And until that happens, we are longing after something. We want more. I want more. I want Him to manifest Himself more. I want more of His presence, more of His power, more of His help. I want more. Don't you want more? That seems to be what this is all about. They can't fast while I am here. Why? They've got the bridegroom. This isn't just random or sporadic exercise of the Christian. This has to do with what we desire. That's what I want the church to do and I want the church to fast several times a year at least. I hope you are fasting outside of the times the church calls for a church fast. I don't want people to do it mechanically or just because we got into the tradition of starting the year with a week of prayer and fasting. This has to come from desire. This has to come from unfulfilled desire, unfulfilled passion, unfulfilled longing. That is what He is talking about here. Let us go further with this.

How about Luke 2:36? We are going to get closer to the heart of this. I think we are already hitting on it. I hope this will help bring it into even greater clarity. Luke 2:36. You may remember, there was a prophetess named Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. "She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin." Then as a widow until she was 84. She did not depart from the temple. Notice this: "Worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day." Here is what I want you to see. Look, our lives are to be lived for the glory of God; whatsoever we do, whether we eat or drink, or don't eat and drink. We are to do everything for the glory of God. This is about worship. Worship comes from the Old English "weorthscipe." It has to do with the worthiness of something. Worship is when we are recognizing the worth of something. There is nobody more worthy than God Almighty. There is nothing more worthy. He, alone, is worthy of our worship. And she, Anna, was worshipping with fasting.

Fasting is a form of worship. Why? Think about this: When I fast because of the reason given in Matthew 6, because I long for the Father's reward. When I fast because the bridegroom has been taken away, and my longing is for Him. When I need God; when I need what God can give me; when I need God Himself; when I am longing for that, that's worship. Look, when we're needy people and we are coming to God and we are desperate, and we need His help - but more than that; more than what He can give us. We need Him. We want Him. That's worship. Isn't it? Isn't it the heart and soul of worship when we are wanting God more than anything else? When I say, you know what? I want God! I will give up food for these seasons in my life because I really want Him. I want Him more than food. I need food. I get hungry. But I have a hunger in my soul for Him. And you see, that is worship. (Incomplete thought)

The last New Testament verse (well, actually, there's two) I would take us to are found in Acts. The early church. We see them fasting. Acts 13. Acts 13 is the chapter in Scripture where we see the missionary endeavor taking root and form. Paul and Barnabas are sent out of the church of Antioch. Paul's first missionary journey. Acts 13:1. "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who is called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting..." Now we know that with Anna who was worshiping with fasting, Here, the ESV anyways says "worshiping the Lord and fasting." The Holy Spirit said: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. And after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off." Now, were they fasting just as a typical practice and that's when the Spirit came? Or did the Spirit somehow move through a prophet and indicate these men needed to go to the mission field? They saw this as being such an important event that they needed to fast. I don't know the exact order here. It almost seems like if you take it at face value, it seems like they were fasting. The Spirit in the midst of their fasting indicated maybe through a New Testament prophet that these were the two guys that were to be sent. And they continued in their praying and fasting. But anyways, the prayer and fasting seems to go hand in hand with the sending out of the first missionaries. They are going out and cross from Asia over into Europe and we know all the churches that would be established. This is a major matter. This missionary movement is flowing out of this praying and fasting.

We go a little further in the book of Acts. Acts 14:23. Now Paul and Barnabas - they're moving around through the churches and are coming back to churches that they've already established. Churches that were already planted. Acts 14:23, "When they appointed elders for them in every church..." and now they are going back to these churches that they originally planted. Now they are going back to them. These churches are springing up and they are appointing elders and they are doing this with prayer and fasting. It is like when Paul and Barnabas are designated from the church of Antioch to go out. When Paul and Barnabas themselves go into these churches and elders are being appointed. It is being done with prayer and fasting. Why? Because there's this desperate need then. You want to be right about the leaders that you are choosing to take the Gospel out on missionary endeavors and who is going to be overseeing the churches. This is a time of desperation: Lord, we need answers from You. We need Your help. We need clarity. We need discernment. You can just see, it's times of great need. They commit themselves to prayer and fasting.

Those are the verses in the New Testament where you find fasting come up. You get a feel for what it's about. Now, I want to take you to an Old Testament passage in the remaining 25 minutes or so. This is a great passage. Turn in your Bibles first to Ezra 4. We have to build the setting here before we can just dive right into it. If you don't get a feel for the setting, you kind of lose some of this. So if you go to Ezra... Let me just tell you, if you want to do a real interesting study, very carefully study Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. Haggai and Zechariah are the two prophets that God sent into Jerusalem in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Those four books are all from the same time period. It's that time period of the rebuilding of the Temple after the Babylonian captivity. They all go together. Two of them are side by side in the minor prophets and two of them are right before the Book of Job and Psalms and that area of your Bible. But they go together. It is very interesting if you start looking at the timetables. And

often, they measured the time by whoever was in the leadership, whether that was Cyrus or Darius. And they talk about if you go back before that, it was Nebuchadnezzar - in the certain year of Nebuchadnezzar.

Anyway, let's look at this. Ezra 4:24. Actually, glance back up to Ezra 4:4 since you're right in the same chapter. I want you to see this. What happens in Ezra 4:4? What do you see happen there? Fear. Let me tell you what happened. 70 years of Babylonian captivity go by. 70 years. Which prophet prophesied they'd be in Babylon 70 years? Jeremiah. Daniel picked up on that, Daniel prayed right there towards the end. What happens? Cyrus comes along and Cyrus says: "Any Jews that want to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild? Go back." So they go back. And first thing they did, they built the altar. That was the first thing they did. Second thing they did, was they laid the foundation for the Temple. In 4:4, they quit work on the Temple after they have the foundation laid out of fear. (Incomplete thought) Listen, even though they had a commission to do this, the capital is a long way away. By the time they get to this point, Cyrus isn't even there anymore. What they get is that people who did not like the Jews. Antisemitism was very much alive back then. They did not want these Jews rebuilding the walls, or rebuilding the Temple. They did not want that. They were opposed to it. They tried various ways to stop them, scare them. They managed - they scared them. They got the foundation completed and then they terrified them. The Jews quit.

Now I want you to jump down to Ezra 4:24. "Then the work of the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped." They got the foundation done and it stopped. And notice this: "It ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia" Cyrus was gone by the time this work would resume. It would resume in the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

Now jump to Haggai and Zechariah. We want to look at those two momentarily. They are right at the end of the Old Testament in the minor prophets. Haggai is very short. Zechariah is a bit longer. But remember that, the work would not resume until the second year of this reign of Darius. So now, if we go to Haggai - are you all there? Everyone got it? Old Testament. Last book is Malachi. Jump back before that. You've got Zechariah. Before that, you've got Haggai. Little tiny book. Notice how it starts. Haggai 1:1. Remember, back in Ezra, we saw that the work on the house of God ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. Now, Haggai picks up in the second year of Darius the king. This is the precise year that the building is going to resume. The second year of Darius the king.

Now jump over to Zechariah 1:1, which is your next book in your Bibles. Zechariah 1:1. And you're going to see, it starts in the eighth month, in the second year of Darius. Again it is the same. It's the same. That text that we had there in Ezra 4:24, that the building would resume, is the exact same year that both of these books start. Why? Well, I'll tell you what happened, they quit out of fear and God sent both these prophets in the very year that they would resume to kick start these people into resuming the building. They were wrong to quit. They weren't trusting the Lord! They were living in fear. And if you go back and read Ezra, what you find is God sent Haggai and Zechariah to them. These are the prophets sent to them to kick them in the rear and get them building again. God was not happy that they stopped building. Now, let's just keep moving along here. Go to Zechariah 7. Zechariah 7:1 starts in the fourth year of king Darius. Now, I'm just going to tell you this. In Ezra, we find out that the Temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius. Zechariah 7 starts in the fourth year. The construction was

kicked back into gear in the second year. We know that it's finished in the sixth year. Guess where the fourth year puts you? Right in the middle of the reconstruction of the new Temple. We are going somewhere with this. Just hang with me here. You got to picture yourselves. This is Jerusalem. They have been in fear of their enemies. They quit. After their foundation was laid, they quit. God was not pleased. God sent these prophets. Told them: "You need to start rebuilding, you need to trust Me." (Incomplete thought) What you've tried to do has not been blessed, because you have not given first priority to the rebuilding of My Temple. That is what He told them through these prophets. And so they resumed building in the second year of Darius. They finished it in the sixth year. Zechariah chapter 7 is in the fourth year. It is when the Temple is half-way restored. That is key.

Now, look at Zechariah 7:2. Now, the people of Bethel... Bethel was 11 miles north of Jerusalem. There were Jews there as well. Jews that came back - they didn't all go to Jerusalem. Many of them went back to where their families came from. Not all of them went to Jerusalem. Many were in the surrounding cities. And so you've got a bunch of Jews in Bethel 11 miles north of Jerusalem. "And they sent Sharezer and Regem-melech..." Interesting - these are still Babylonian names on these Jews. And they're men to entreat the favor of the Lord. In other words, they are sending an entourage from Bethel 11 miles to Jerusalem. Why? Check this out - verse 3. "Saying to the priests of the house of the Lord..." You see, they sent them to where the priests were and where the house of the Lord was which at this time is halfway rebuilt. "And the prophets..." We know who the prophets are. You can see that in Ezra. That's these two guys, Haggai and Zechariah. Notice what they say: "Should I weep and abstain?" Abstain? What is that? That is fasting. If you doubt it, down to a few verses, he tells us that is exactly what it means. Abstain from food. Should we weep? Doesn't it go hand in hand with mourning? Like we saw in the New Testament, where mourn and fasting are used interchangeably. They are talking about weeping and abstaining. It goes hand in hand. I was leading you back to fasting. "Should I weep and abstain (or fast) in the fifth month as I have done for so many years?"

Now, the "so many" years is seventy years. He is going to tell us that precisely in verse 5. God is going to tell us. What are the seventy years? The seventy years are when they were in captivity. What they are saying is this: they sent these two select men with their entourage 11 miles to Jerusalem to the priest and to the prophets, and they are saying, hey guys, go ask the priests and the prophets whether we are supposed to continue to fast in the fifth month like we have been for seventy years.

Why would they have done that? To express their mourning for the fact that Nebuchadnezzar came in and wiped out the temple and burned it and it was destroyed. That is basically what is going on here. Fifth month of the year, these people have been fasting for seventy years. They have a question as to whether they should continue. And here's the thing, the temple is being rebuilt. It's like, well, we want to know, should we keep fasting for the sake of the Temple, when the Temple is actually now getting rebuilt? Does it make any sense to keep fasting? We fasted before because we lost the Temple. Nebuchadnezzar burned it. We were mourning. But now that it's being rebuilt, should we still keep on weeping and mourning? Is that even right? And we are hearing word the thing is well under construction. It is likely to be completed. Do we keep fasting? So they sent this delegation to the priests and prophets in Jerusalem. Notice Zechariah 7:4- 5. "Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me." This is

Zechariah. Verse 5: "Say to all the people of the land and the priests, when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month..." They not only fasted then; they were asking about the fifth month, but God throws in here the seventh as well for these. Here we get the exact number of years, these seventy years while they were in captivity. "Was it for Me that you fasted?" Was it for Me that you fasted?

Now we are getting back at the heart of why we fast. Was it for Me? What an answer! But there is more! Read verse 6 with me. This is interesting because their question is about fasting. "When you eat and when you drink..." Wait, God just said to them: "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and the seventh for seventy years, was it for Me that you fasted?" And then He goes right on to say - their question isn't even about eating and drinking, It's about whether they should continue mourning and abstaining - fasting. But He goes on to say, "When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?" It's like, wow... Lord. Why do You give them that bit of information when they are not even being asked about eating and drinking. Do you get the idea that what was so important to the Jews - and it is! This is a really important question for these Jews. They felt it so critical to figure out whether they should continue this or not continue this, that they actually go to the extent of sending a party of men to Jerusalem to get an answer. They obviously find Zechariah. Zechariah's a man who can give them an answer, right? He is a prophet of God, He's got a connection with the Lord. They want to know.

Why would you even ask that question? Why would you even send this delegation to find out? Because you want to know what pleases the Lord. They are thinking, they are discussing among themselves. They are getting together at Bethel and thinking, "Should we continue this?" Which is pleasing to the Lord? Is it pleasing to the Lord that we continue to fast? Or is it pleasing to the Lord that we discontinue this fast? That is what they are asking about. But you see how God answers? God is saying to them what's really and truly important to Me is missed by your questions altogether. You see, you are sitting there thinking that whether you fast or don't fast is going to make the difference. And God is saying it's not going to make any difference. I am not pleased with you when you eat and drink. Nor I am pleased with you when you don't eat and drink. You see the Lord's point? Your fifth month fast has been no good because you don't do it for Me! You don't do it for Me. If that's all the Lord has said; if He had stopped right there, they'd be going home thinking: Oh, okay, so God is not pleased with the fast. Ok guys, Bethel we need to stop fasting. God will be pleased with this.

No! It was necessary that He say the next thing, so that they really get the point. You guys have a bigger issue than whether you are fasting or not fasting. The way to please God is not for these people to simply quit the fast. The Lord says that's no good either because you give the fast up and then you go back to eating and drinking. You don't do that for Me either. Our primary question about fasting, because you get all the time: How often should I fast? How long should I fast when I do fast? What should this look like? Do I fast for a meal? Do I fast for a whole day? Three days? Seven days? (Incomplete thought) Look, I'll tell you this, if you are Christian, Jesus is clearly saying that fasting can be beneficial to you in order to receive the reward that God has. The greatest reward that God can give you is Himself, and greater manifestations of Himself. That is the greatest thing He can give you. He is the greatest treasure that He has to give.

And the thing is when you try to concern yourselves with how long? What should my frequency be? What should this look like? There is definitely benefit in it if you are doing it for the sake of God. If you are just doing it mechanically; if you're just doing it because it has become tradition or habit, because the rest of church does it because GCC has this tradition of starting out each year with a week of prayer and fasting. Okay, you're going to do this because... Look, the real issue in this is you can eat and drink to the glory of God. You can fast and do that to the glory of the Lord. And then you can go back to eating and you can do it to the glory of the Lord. You don't have to feel a bit guilty. But the driving motivator here should be desire for God; it should be desire for Him; it should be doing it for Him. He is saying you did not fast for Me and when you eat and drink, you do that for yourselves. Our sights are set on the Lord. This is all God-perspective here in fasting. That's the real issue.

We don't want to get so hung up on ritual. The Pharisee: "Oh, I fast twice in a week." You can get to where fasting just becomes ritualistic. You just do it to do it. You do it because it is almost like you feel there is some magic about it. I fast and somehow I am twisting God's arm to do this or do that for me. That's not what this is about. You have to remember, Jesus is talking about when we fast, there is a God who sees in secret. What's He looking at? Not just your fasting exercise. He is looking at your heart! Didn't Jesus come along and say, "You know, Isaiah said the right thing about you guys!" He was specifically talking about where Isaiah said that these people draw near to Me with their mouth. But their hearts - they are far from Me. God looks at the heart. When you are talking about fasting, (Incomplete thought) there are times not to fast. There are times when the bridegroom is there. It is time not to fast. But the bridegroom has been taken away. We ought to be desperate. There ought to be lots of times when we're just desperate for having Him draw nearer. Do you ever get just desperate? It is like I don't have enough of God!

This is clearly the most important question we need to be asking: "Are we doing this for God?" As far as frequency, it is something you and I have to work through. It's something we have to ask questions about. Just the question about whether we fast or don't fast, you can tell, God thinks that's not the most important thing. It's a trifle. They totally miss what's essential when they are asking a question like that. That's all we ask. Brethren, we need to beware of ceremony, tradition, and ritual in all of this. We need to be guided by desire, That's a good thing to fast for! God, give me more desire for You! You got this promise sealed with the blood of Jesus Christ, that if you fast in secret, there are rewards.

I'll tell you this, Jesus did not say you will get these rewards whether you fast or not. He did not say that. He did not say that this whole thing of fasting is just indifferent whether you do it or not you get the same thing that you would have gotten anyways. That's never said about prayer and fasting in Scriptures. What you need to know is this: there are people in this world, Christians that fast, and they received rewards from the Father that other people don't receive because they don't seek the Lord the same way. They are not as desperate. They don't need Him. And so they don't get. Scriptures says you don't have because you don't ask. We can easily say, you don't have because you don't fast. There may be things that you will not get unless you seek them with real diligent prayer and fasting.

Again, there is a textual issue, but there is a place where Jesus in Mark 9 talks about this kind only goes out by prayer and fasting. He is talking about spiritual battles, won or lost, that

hinge on prayer and fasting. The textual issue is that some of the manuscripts have fasting and some don't.

But even that regardless, prayer is there in all of them. It is the fact that there is a kind of prayer that goes along with fasting. It is an intensified way of seeking the Lord. When your heart is towards Him and your heart is yearning towards Him, God sees us fasting like that, it is very pleasing to Him. Very pleasing when we're desperate. When we're longing because the bridegroom has been taken away. It is worship. Do we not see that with Hannah? It is worship. This is a way to worship. God never wants you to worship when it's only with your lips or it's only in a mechanical way performed by your body. We can grit our teeth and not eat. God does not want that. That's not true worship. Worship is from the heart. God wants us to worship with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. That is what He is looking at. That's what is pleasing to Him.

That's not just a matter of "Should I fast or should I not fast?" It is more about where the heart is in all of it. If our heart is desperate for God, you would think fasting is going to be something that is going to be simultaneous to our desperation. In this life, when we want, and we desire, and we hunger, and we long for more of Him, more of that reward that only He can give. We know by faith He is watching, by faith we know that He rewards us. The big things are things you are desperate for in life - those things you know if God does not give them to you, you will not have the salvation of people's souls, the advance of the Gospel, big things in life, major things. You are trying to figure out, you know, if you want to marry somebody, or you're trying to figure out leadership for the church, what missionary is going to be sent... These are appropriate times to be fasting - big decisions in your life where you need to lay hold on God. You need an answer. You need Him. You do it for Him. Any approach to God that makes Him great. Not that we do, but you know how we talk about magnifying the Lord. That doesn't mean we make Him bigger than He already is. When we magnify the Lord, all we do is come closer and closer to a proper perspective of what He is, who He is, how He is, what His attributes are.

But brethren, when we are going to God in desperation, you know what that does? You know what it communicates? I recognize, I am needy, I am desperate, I am helpless, I am bankrupt, and He is the fountain of all good. He is Jehovah Jireh. I need Him. He is the provider. He is glorified when we view Him like that. If we really recognize how utterly desperate we are and bankrupt we are in ourselves, and just the riches that are to be had; this treasure house of riches that are in Christ. Like I say, the greatest riches that God can give us is His own Son and His own Self, fellowship with Himself.

Brethren, you get overwhelmed by the presence of God and you don't want anything else in this world. There is nothing greater than that. And for Him to sweep us ultimately up into His presence where we can behold Him face to face and be married to Him, be His bride, walk with Him and talk with Him, behold His glory. There will be nothing greater than just beholding the glory of Jesus Christ. Don't you want more now? Aren't you desperate for that? That's what it is all about when you hunger after that and you actually fast because you long for that. That is worship. God is very pleased when your heart is in it.

If you get to the place where you feel like my heart is not in prolonging this fast. I feel like right now, I could sit down and eat a steak. I could do that more to His glory. Then do it. Eat your steak! If there is nothing in your life that is that desperate at that moment, go eat your

steak! And praise God for it! That's a word on fasting. Brief theology on fasting. Hopefully, that helps maybe bring a little more clarity.

Father, we pray that the reality of this that we've seen in Scriptures might be true in our lives and true in our church especially in this season where we give ourselves just such fasting. Make us desperate for You, Father, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.