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## Joining Together for Revival

by Pastor Scott Boerckel

**Almost daily, I am appalled by the proposed and enacted policies of our national, state, and local leaders. Matters that were part of our collective moral conscience now are regarded as evil, and those matters which were once abhorrent to all are now regarded as virtuous.**

We have truly arrived at times similar to the Lord's judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Isaiah, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!" (Isaiah 5:20-21).

*(continued on page 2)*

### This Month's Theme:

"Don't eat that. It will spoil your appetite." Good moms are prone to say something like that. They don't want their children satisfying themselves on "junk food" and not be hungry for a nutritious meal. In a similar way the Bible suggests that a full stomach can diminish one's hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It can spoil our appetite for God. "Fasting" is a spiritual discipline taught and modeled by Jesus designed to help us grow in Christlikeness.

In this edition of the OakLeaf we will consider ways in which the things we "hunger for" besides God can be obstacles to fully pursuing God. What are you most hungry for?



## The Problems in our Nation

I don't think that I need to trot out too many examples to demonstrate the moral collapse of our nation, but here are some national, state, and local examples:

**National:** We have attempted to redefine marriage. We further regard marriage lightly by living together and divorce and remarriage. Our nation has 23% of her children living in a single parent home, more than three times the world average. In fact, we lead the world in the number of single parent homes.<sup>i</sup> We are facing a national disaster by attempting to use our military as a grand social experiment rather than as a means of national defense.<sup>ii</sup>

**State:** The State of Illinois has made it clear that they want the state to be a destination for obtaining abortions.<sup>iii</sup> They are attempting to put pregnancy resource centers out of business.<sup>iv</sup> They have shackled our police in the fight against crime and have emboldened criminals in their pursuit of evil.

**Local:** Our public schools have become one great laboratory experiment in social engineering. They seek to redefine morality, while at the same time denying that morality has anything to do with it. Instead of promotion of legitimate business, it seems easier for local officials to expand gambling and marijuana shops. Just in video gaming and just in the Town of Normal, the amount gambled in May of 2023 was \$9,606,297.02.<sup>v</sup> Together, the two marijuana dispensaries in Bloomington/Normal are estimated to have grossed \$19 million in 2021.<sup>vi</sup> This promises to be more as more dispensaries come to our communities.

## The Sad Responses of the Church in America

### *Compromise*

The church in America has tried several answers to these sad trends. One attempt is to compromise and join the culture in its headlong pursuit of self-destruction. So, the church in America waffles on issues of import. It began with compromises over

divorce, but that was followed quickly on the heels by compromises on homosexuality, the recreational use of drugs, and the determination to avoid attaching any stigma to sin and its pernicious effects. Today, one can find some church leader somewhere to embrace almost any immoral position, thus lending legitimacy to any particular immorality.

### *Hypocrisy*

It is not just in compromise that the church in America has failed. Even more glaring is the way in which hypocrisy prevails. The larger culture reports with glee that professing Christians divorce at the same rate, use pornography in the same proportion, engage in physical and sexual abuse and lie and cheat and steal, and then try to cover their sinful tracks. Sadly, we see example after example of church LEADERS doing these very things and then attempting to justify their evils. Historically, the church has not stood strong against racism, which is a hypocrisy that opponents of the church use to shame the church into silence. Together, these various hypocrisies have muted the church in America's moral authority and have weakened her prophetic voice to declare right from wrong.

### *Political answers*

Another attempted answer by the church to address America's moral decline is to engage in the business of politics. Now this engagement has always been less influential than the media portray, but many Christians mistakenly believe that the answer to America's moral decline is just to get the right people into office. There are three problems with this approach:

1) It leads to a false patriotism. The idea of America as "God's chosen people" is not true, and even if you want to argue the point, it is less true than ever before. A false patriotism leads to the placing of misplaced priorities, where "get out the vote" initiatives become more important than "get out the Gospel" initiatives. It leads to the waving of the flag over the proclamation of the Bible. Now, don't misunderstand me. There is a place for true patriotism by all believers in whatever country that they live in. But we need to remind ourselves that our citizenship is in heaven.



Believing too much in political solutions leads to a confusion of those priorities;

2) The church ends up becoming partners with dirty people. Politics is a dirty business where compromise and give and take must rule the day. When we begin to say, “Well, this guy is immoral, but at least he’s OUR guy,” we have become partners in the wrong endeavor. This does not mean that we don’t vote unless the candidate is perfect. But it does mean that we don’t get all sucked into a committed engagement with morally compromised, evil people. The church has been naïve on that front ever since Constantine;

3) Simply as a pragmatic matter, the church no longer has the influence to reform society by political means. We are no longer a “Christian nation.” Of course, we never have been, IF by “Christian nation” we mean that the majority of the population were genuine believers in Jesus, bound for heaven. However, even if we merely defined “Christian nation” as people who agreed to the Christian values found in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, even if they never obeyed them, we still must conclude today that this is not a “Christian nation,” even if it used to be. So, an attempt now to reform culture by political means will not succeed.

### **What Shall We Do? The Need for Revival of the Church and the Sermon Series this Fall in Ezra**

I am convinced that the only hope for our nation will come from a revival of the American church that leads to a reformation of our culture and the salvation of many

millions of people. We are simply too far gone for any other solution to take hold. Of course, we cannot make revival come to the church. We cannot influence thousands of churches and millions of people. But we can prepare our own hearts for the work of the Holy Spirit. We can be revived ourselves! Would you join me on a journey this fall as we consider the hope and promise of revival from the book of Ezra? Beginning September 3 and continuing through the fall, we will have a ten message series in Ezra with a special focus on personal and corporate revival.

### **Events and Activities Associated with the Message Series**

In conjunction with this message series, we will be coordinating several activities and ministries around the theme of revival. Here are some examples:

1. We plan to alternate extended corporate prayer times and celebration of communion every other Sunday of the series. In the extended corporate prayer time, we will not just be hearing from someone praying “up front,” but we will be connecting the congregation in small groups throughout the worship center. We will conduct the communion a bit differently too, with people coming to tables set up throughout our worship center.
2. Each of our Wednesday night prayer meetings for the fall will be on the theme of revival. Pastor Jeff has made a life study of revival and will share his insights along with some rich times of prayer.
3. We will be making small group book studies of Ezra available for small groups to use so that they can dive more deeply into this wonderful book of the Bible. The goal will be personal and corporate revival, not just knowing the content of Ezra.
4. We will be starting new small groups that will be just for the fall study in Ezra. If the group desires to continue further, we can enable that, but there is no obligation beyond the fall participation. In this way, we hope more folks will be part of a small group this fall.
5. When we get to Ezra 7, particularly Ezra 7:10, we will be talking about revival as “study, do, teach” or, as we say in our vital signs, “rooted, growing, making”. Pastor Traig will be develop-

ing some personal video testimonies of folks in our church. These are people who have learned that personal spiritual growth and revival don't just come from knowing more, it comes at least in part from being able to teach what you know to others.

6. We plan to do a post-sermon podcast each week to add new material that was not in the message or to emphasize some important points of the message.
7. We also plan to have Pastor Jeff do a video summary of his Wednesday night teaching each week, especially for those unable to attend the prayer meeting.
8. To connect to one another and to serve our church in a similar way that Ezra had the people of Israel serve, the deacons hope to have a fall work day.
9. We are planning to have a Friday night "Watch Night Prayer" time in the fall for both personal and corporate prayer over revival.
10. We hope to publish an Ezra resource notebook which will contain places for your sermon notes, your prayers, and your reflections in the journey this fall as we seek personal and corporate revival.

### **What does this have to do with fasting?**

In this edition of the Oak Leaf, we are focusing on the Christian discipline of fasting. Fasting is a way for us to yearn for God, to seek Him more than we seek food. However, fasting is not trying to get God to pay attention to us because we suffer. God is far too good and too true to submit Himself to those sorts of manipulative endeavors. Rather we fast simply to focus on the divine—to know HIM.

In Ezra, we will encounter a couple of times of fasting. One is in Ezra 8:21-23 where Ezra proclaims a fast to ask the Lord for protection for His people because he was too embarrassed to ask the king to give the protection because Ezra had already told the king that the Lord would protect them. The first purpose of this fast was that "we might humble ourselves before our God." (Ezra 8:21) There is indeed the request for protection, but the humbling before

the Lord came first in importance. Another episode of fasting in Ezra comes in chapter 9 where the people become aware of the gravity of their sinfulness. This is always part of revival. As a result of this awareness, Ezra tore his garment and his cloak and pulled hair from his head and beard and sat appalled and fasted. Fasting is a way to sit still and become aware of spiritual realities that can easily escape our notice when we are busy with our normal life.

So, in this Oak Leaf, you will learn something about fasting, and you are being introduced to our fall emphasis upon revival. Will you pray that God may do a remarkable work in us, that we may encounter the living God?

### **We can't change our nation, but we can ask God to change us**

The problems in our nation are essentially spiritual. The problems in the church are essentially spiritual. The problems in my life are essentially spiritual! The answer to those problems will not come from pragmatic policy or political initiatives. The answer will come as God's people are broken before His holiness, confess their sins, and cling to the cross. We cannot make that happen, either nationwide or in our own community. We can, however, seek the Lord with all our hearts. I believe that He rewards those who diligently seek Him. If we are revived, the Holy Spirit may be pleased to fan that flame more broadly. Whether He does or not, we will have encountered the Living God.

With anticipation for God's gracious work among us this fall,

Pastor Scott

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/courage-strength-optimism/the-military-isnt-the-place-for-woke-social-experiments>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://news.wttw.com/2023/01/13/pritzker-signs-law-expanding-access-abortion-protecting-out-state-patients>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.rnstar.com/story/news/state/2023/04/03/illinois-lawmakers-approve-measure-about-crisis-pregnancy-centers/70070310007/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.igb.illinois.gov/videoreports.aspx>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.wglt.org/local-news/2022-04-20/marijuana-users-celebrate-4-20-mclean-county-taxing-bodies-celebrate-how-much-tax-money-pot-makes>

# Are We Forgetting Something?

## Prayer with Fasting

by Dr. Jeff VanGoethem

**I think we are all familiar with the “Action Film” genre. These films usually present certain big-screen heroes jumping into action to save the city, the world, the planet, the damsel in distress and whatever else.**

Normally this involves fights on the tops of moving trains, 100 mph car chases through crowded cities, miraculous leaps off tall buildings or cliffs and other exciting, seemingly impossible exploits. It is all about taking action.

It is interesting however in Scripture that the real action in God’s Kingdom is often not a hero jumping into something, but a needy soul falling to his or her knees. Frequently we see in the Bible that heroic action did not come before prayer and fasting for God’s mighty deliverance. Our first action should often be to our knees, with fasting and fervent prayer.

*Consider some examples:*

- When Nehemiah heard the sad word about the broken-down condition of Jerusalem, he did not jump immediately into action. First, he “continued praying and fasting” for many days, looking for God to move and open doors.
- When Daniel believed it was time for the nation of Israel to be restored, he turned his face to the Lord “seeking Him by prayers and pleas for mercy with fasting.” (Dan. 9:3). He took no action until God acted.

*We see this also in the call to corporate prayer and fasting in the Bible. Some more examples:*

- When foreign armies were threatening Judah, King Jehoshaphat “set his face to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.” (2Chron. 20:3).
- When Ezra began to lead the exiles on their perilous journey back to the land of Israel, he “proclaimed a fast” to seek God’s protection and guidance. (Ezra



8:21). Yes, he was willing and ready to act, but not before praying and fasting.

- Similarly, when Queen Esther was apprised of the genocidal plot against her people, before taking her case to the king she asked that all the people be gathered to “hold a fast” on her behalf. (Esther 4:16)

I could go on. Are we missing something in today’s church? Think about the Lord Jesus – before beginning his public ministry, he devoted an intense season to prayer and fasting in the wilderness. We Americans are action-oriented people. We rise up and do stuff. That is a good thing. But we must recognize in the battle with spiritual darkness in the world, our actions will not amount to much unless the mighty hand of God is involved. As Jesus taught us, “without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Let’s be willing, along with our noble action, to fast and pray, and to call for seasons of fasting and praying, with the understanding that without God, many of our battles will be lost.

Fasting is a partner to fervent, dependent, desperate praying. In our personal lives, when faced with difficult and vexing problems, we pray with fasting. Corporately, as a church, as believers, as we face the spiritual and moral decline all around us, we should be praying and fasting for God’s deliverance and intervention. We need Him to take action, which is invoked by prayer and fasting. Then He will lead us into action for His glory.



*Pastor Jeff VanGoethem has been in pastoral ministry for 40 years, including nearly twenty as Senior Pastor of East White Oak. He has returned to East White Oak after pastoring for some years in Dallas, Texas to serve as Associate Pastor of Spiritual Development and Missions. He is married to Karen. They have four daughters and four grandchildren.*



# Fasting: Power from Helplessness

by April Kinzinger

**When Becky Shames and I started Cornerstone Christian Academy in 1997, it didn't take long for us to learn that the school would be built on our knees.**

That is, prayer would take on a central part in determining what God wanted for this new work. And so we learned to pray big prayers for impossible things, telling the Lord that without His intervention on our behalf we were completely helpless.

Time and time again we saw God answer in incredible ways. The school began to grow very quickly and within just a few years we had expanded to three different locations. The staff still met to pray together every morning on their knees before leaving for our different sites. It became evident to us that we would have to relocate if we ever planned on being together in one place. And while we always had just enough money, there wasn't any left over to dedicate to the purchase of land or the construction of a school.

**We did not know what to do** but wanted to keep our eyes on what God wanted for us.

I remember visiting with a businessman in Bloomington and discussing a possible location for a new school building. Where should we look? Should we renovate an older building or build new? Should we look on the east side of Bloomington or the north? During the discussion he reached into his desk and pulled out a plat book of McLean County. As he flipped through the pages, I saw yellow markings which highlighted the rural acreage that he himself owned in the county. He pointed to one of those highlighted squares and said, "How about this one?" It was a 40-acre piece of farmland that was located 7 miles east of Towanda Barnes Road. We rode out with him the next week to take a look at the land. I remember seeing how far away it was from Bloomington, even past a little town called Holder. But God had answered so many prayers for us in unusual ways, so Becky and I determined we would pray



*Sign posted at the site of Cornerstone's property during construction.*



*The first phase of the building was completed in 2003.*



*Prayer during the groundbreaking for phase two of the new building.*

for three days about this land. And we would do one more thing: we would fast.

We were not new to fasting. We had fasted for 12 days before a crucial meeting with the McLean County board where we were asking for two variances needed in order to even start the school. We had also fasted as we prayed for desks, chairs, and other school furniture we could not afford to buy. Why is fasting important and why does God bless it? I believe it's because when you fast you are declaring to God your complete helplessness and total dependence on Him. It's exactly where He wants you to be.

Fasting is often talked about in scripture. Moses fasted for 40 days and 40 nights while he was up on Mount Sinai, Elijah fasted while escaping wicked Queen Jezebel, Ezra fasted over the sin of his people, and Queen Esther fasted for the safety of the Jews. We can read of fasting by Daniel, the apostle Paul, and certainly by Jesus himself. Perhaps my favorite fasting example in the Bible takes place in 2 Chronicles 20. Israel's enemies the Moabites and Ammonites had come against King Jehoshaphat for battle. Verse three tells us that he was afraid and "set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah." As people came from all over to seek the Lord together, Jehoshaphat prayed, pledging to trust God and saying, "...we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

That described our situation in the fall of 2000 as we walked the 40 acres so far east of town. We did not know what to do but wanted to keep our eyes on what God wanted for us. So we committed to pray and fast for three days asking God if that was the location He would want for us. Now understand, we didn't have any money to even think about buying 40 acres! But God... nothing is impossible for him.

At the end of the three-day fast, we came together to talk about what God had shown us as we had prayed and read the word. While we were meeting the call came. The businessman in question had decided on his own that 7 miles east of Bloomington was probably a bit too far. And so he approached a farmer who owned 78 acres 4 miles closer and asked him if he was willing to sell his land. Believe it or not, the farmer agreed and the land was purchased. And on



(Above) Cornerstone staff in prayer



(Left) Cornerstone mural in front hallway

November 1, 2001, that businessman and his wife gave the land to Cornerstone. While we were blown away by the generosity of those donors, we came back to God with our hearts overflowing with gratefulness.

Does God reward fasting? I believe he does. John Piper says of fasting in his book, *A Hunger for God*: "...He rewards acts that confess human helplessness and that express hope in God, because these acts call attention to his glory." We always wanted to point people to the greatness of our God. When we didn't know what to do, He always did. As we kept our eyes on Him, He did the impossible. That's why when you enter Cornerstone Christian Academy the first thing you see is a large mural with the verse from Psalm 118:23: "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."



April Kinzinger is the retired cofounder of Cornerstone Christian Academy in Bloomington. She is married to Dave and they have two sons and six grandchildren. April spends her time speaking, teaching classes in theology, and leading Bible studies.



# Purpose Filled Fasting

by Pastor Traig Whittaker

## Ask around about fasting and it won't be long before you hear a story like this one...

"I've fasted and nothing happened. The pastor said that it was in the Bible so I decided to try it. First thing in the morning I didn't go down for breakfast with the kids. I didn't think that I had enough willpower to do that. So, I went to the office early. Usually about midmorning some coworkers gather for coffee and a snack. I didn't want to tell people what I was doing so I made up some story about why I couldn't join them. After skipping lunch, by midafternoon my concentration was shot. All I could think about was how hungry I was. When I got home from work my wife was preparing supper for herself and the kids. A plan began to formulate in my mind...if I could just make it until midnight that would qualify as a full day of fasting. I made it. At the stroke of twelve I set aside all self-restraint. It was just me and the fridge. I don't think that fasting helped me one bit."

## What's the difference between this misery-filled, self-centered experiment and truly biblical fasting?

### Purpose.

Here are a few examples of biblical purposes for fasting.

- Fast for enhanced prayer – Fasting has a way of providing extraordinary focus to our prayerful intercessions.

- Fast for getting direction – Fasting can be a means of more clearly discerning God's will.
- Fast to express grief over sin – Of course, all repentance should reflect some degree of godly sorrow.
- Fast to seek God's help – One of the most common biblical fasts was to seek deliverance from an enemy or threatening circumstance.
- Fast as an expression of unique concern for a move of God – It may be a personal renewal or something as broad as a national revival.
- Fast as an element of overcoming temptation – An extraordinary temptation may call for this extraordinary step.
- Fast to reveal to yourself just how much you want God – We are happy to receive God's gifts but are we satisfied with the gifts in such a way as to diminish our desire for the gift-giver?

We don't fast to earn God's favor. We can't fast our way into impressing God. Our relationship with the Lord is established by the work of Christ, not any work that we might do.

Jesus said that those who follow Him would fast. Make sure that your fast is purpose-filled.



*Pastor Traig Whittaker has served at East White Oak since 2000. His ministry responsibilities include oversight of the church's Christian Education programs and administrative duties. Traig is married to Laura and they have four adult children.*

# Quotes about Fasting

compiled by Rob Sizemore

## Some thought provoking quotes from John Piper's book A Hunger for God:

*(Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer)*  
c1997 Crossway Books Wheaton, IL

"Do I really hunger for God? Do I miss Him? Do I long for Him? Or have I begun to be content with His gifts? Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us." P. 19

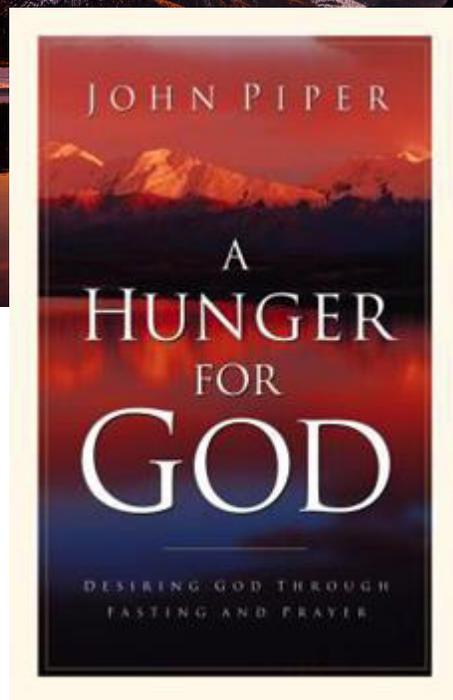
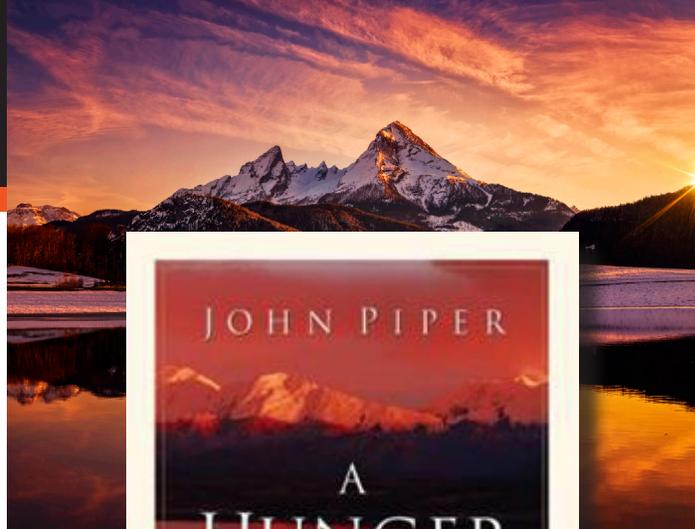
"The danger of eating is that we fall in love with the gift; the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and glory in our willpower." P. 21

"One might think that those who feast most often on communion with God are least hungry... But, paradoxically, it is not so that they are the least hungry saints. The opposite is the case. The strongest, most mature Christians I have ever met are the hungriest for God." P. 23

"... it is not that we have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and no room for the great." P. 27

"Jesus began His ministry with fasting. And He triumphed over His enemy through fasting. And our salvation was accomplished through perseverance by fasting." P. 55

"The absence of fasting is the measure of our contentment with the absence of Christ." P. 93



"...fasting is meant to waken us to the hunger of the World, not just our own hunger... not just to savor the goodness of God in our own bounty, but in the power of love to live for the sake of others." P. 143

"Fasting is an expression of humility—that is, our sense of desperate, utter dependence on God for what we need." P. 170

"God rewards fasting because fasting expresses the cry of the heart that nothing on Earth can satisfy our souls besides God." P. 181



*Rob Sizemore and his wife Robin have attended East White Oak since 2006. Over the years he has helped lead worship and taught various ABF classes. Rob has been teaching in public schools since 1989.*



# 5 Myths About Fasting

by David Mathis

## Myth #1: Jesus commands his followers to fast.

Jesus assumes his followers will fast, and even promises we will fast, but neither he nor his apostles strictly command fasting. While many biblical texts mention fasting, the two most important come just chapters apart in Matthew's Gospel.

The first is Matthew 6:16–18, which comes in sequence with Jesus's teachings on generosity and prayer. Fasting is as basic to Christianity as asking from God and giving to others. The key here is that Jesus doesn't say "if you fast," but "when you fast."

Second is Matthew 9:14–15, which might be the most important scripture on Christian fasting:

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Matt. 9:14–15)

When Jesus, our bridegroom, was here on earth among his disciples, it was a time for the discipline of feasting. But now that he is "taken away" from his disciples, "they will fast." Not "they might, if they ever get around to it," but "they will." Which is confirmed by the pattern of fasting that emerged right away in the early church (Acts 9:9; 13:2; 14:23).

So, he doesn't say that we must. But he says we will. In that sense, fasting is not an obligation, but it is an opportunity—and one too powerful to miss.

## Myth #2: Fasting must be kept private.

Some Christians might assume that fasting must always be kept secret because of Jesus's memorable warning in the Sermon on the Mount: "when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:17–18). Here, Jesus warns us about fasting to "be seen by others." After all, this falls with his instruction on not "practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them" (Matt. 6:1). And surely, when we do fast, our fast should be Godward, not for the eyes and ears of others. That's the caution.

However, Jesus is not here attempting to speak about any and every kind of fast. The Scriptures include many forms of fasting: personal and communal, public and private, congregational and national, regular and occasional, partial and absolute. Past generations knew of communal fasts far better than we do—which may provide a fresh opportunity today for churches and ministry teams.

Also, when we do fast privately and individually, we would do well to think about how our missing a meal (or meals) might affect others we normally eat with. If you have regular lunches with colleagues or dinners with family or roommates, assess how your abstaining will affect them and let them know ahead of time instead of just being a no-show or springing it on them in the moment that you will not be eating. Love for others when we fast is not the same as fasting "to be seen."

## Myth #3: Fasting relates only to food.

Fasting typically means going without food (temporarily) for a spiritual purpose. That's the normal meaning. However, fasting is not limited to abstaining from food. It can be ex-

panded to include temporarily abstaining from other goods, albeit with spiritual goals.

Fasting from food may not be for everyone. Some health conditions keep even the most devout from the traditional course. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.”

If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, smartphone, social media, or some other regular practice that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married couples fasting from sex “for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5).

#### **Myth #4: Fasting secures God’s blessing.**

Isaiah 58:3–5 sounds an important warning about what fasting is not and how it can go wrong. In Isaiah’s day, the nation was in steep decline, and the people’s hearts were divided. For many, their devotion to God had become a shell, an outward show. They fasted to manipulate God rather than to express a humble heart. And God did not honor it. Isaiah says that they ask God, “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” (Isa. 58:3). God answers,

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure. . . . Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? (Isa. 58:3–5)

In other words, your fasting is just a show in a day to serve your cravings, not the sincere expression of ongoing humble hearts. Fasting’s external actions alone, apart from humility, are in vain. God will not be moved by such efforts. He sees the heart—as he did in Jesus’s day, when Pharisees sought to turn fasting into self-exaltation (Matt. 6:16–18). The same still happens today.

#### **Myth #5: Fasting doesn’t really do anything.**

Finally, on the opposite side of presuming God’s blessing, some might assume that fasting doesn’t really “do anything.” If fasting can’t twist God’s arm to secure his favor, then is it just another empty wish? True, fasting does not force God’s hand. But it does seek his face, and it is a God-appointed means of his grace that can be a real channel of blessing and benefit to the humble soul.

What makes fasting such a gift is its ability, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to focus our feelings and their expression toward God in prayer. Fasting walks arm in arm with prayer. That burn in your gut, that rolling fire in your belly demanding that you feed it more food signals game time for fasting as a means of grace. Only as we voluntarily embrace the pain of an empty stomach do we see how much we’ve allowed our belly to be our god (Phil. 3:19).

And in that gnawing ache of growing hunger is the engine of fasting, generating the reminder to bend our longings for food Godward and inspire intensified longings for Jesus. Fasting, says John Piper, is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence, “This much, O God, I want you!”



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# EZRA

THE HOPE & PROMISE OF REVIVAL



"I am convinced that the only hope for our nation will come from a revival of the American church that leads to a reformation of our culture and the salvation of many millions of people. We are simply too far gone for any other solution to take hold. Of course, we cannot make revival come to the church. We cannot influence thousands of churches and millions of people. But we can prepare our own hearts for the work of the Holy Spirit. We can be revived ourselves! Would you join me on a journey this fall as we consider the hope and promise of revival from the book of Ezra?"

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