

On the Subject of Fasting, Part 1

By Pastor Mark Chappell

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Freeway Baptist Church
8501 N Black Canyon Hwy
Phoenix, AZ 85021

Website: www.freewaybaptist.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/freewaybaptist

If you have your Bibles tonight, turn with me, please, to the book of Isaiah 58. Isaiah 58 in God's word tonight and I mentioned in the meeting tonight that our theme for the month of June is "Real Prayer." Has anyone besides myself discovered that there is such a thing as prayer that's not real? Has anybody besides myself ever participated in something that wasn't real prayer like, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep"? Or, "Good golly, good meat, good Lord, let's eat"? Things like this? And sometimes we find ourselves praying in such a way that is more of a repetition; it's a recitation and not a prayer. Now, I believe oftentimes the prayers that we pray are more along those lines than what we may like to admit. The Bible calls us to be people of prayer. Acts 4:31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with great boldness." The result of earnest fervent prayer was the fullness of the Holy Spirit of God upon lives and the utterance of the Gospel with boldness. Sometimes we discount that prayer yields power and what one of us here tonight does not need the power of God upon our life?

Now, I want to bring a message on the subject of fasting. Fasting. This is not an easy subject for anybody to approach but it is one that I believe we all need to hear because the Bible does not indicate to us that fasting is a practice that someone might do but, in fact it is presumed that believers will fast. The Lord said in Matthew 6:16, "When ye fast, do not as the Pharisees." He didn't say, "If you fast," he said, "When you do it." Now, there are a lot of folks that I encounter that say, "Pastor, I've never practiced fasting. I don't do fasting because I don't do well with hunger." And you know, obviously I don't do well with it either, but this is something that God has ordained.

I want to ask before we read our text tonight how many folks in this room have a burden on your heart that is a serious issue that you're taking to the Lord in prayer? Let me see your hands. Lift it up big and high. Be honest. You have a serious issue on your heart. Every honest person here tonight has a hand up. There is some issue that you're grappling with, some burden, some care, some lost loved one, some health issue, some employment issue, a financial burden, a housing issue, an interpersonal relationship, a marital issue, a wayward child, a wayward grandchild, something that is causing you tremendous burden and I may tonight unfold to you biblically the very thing that could bring an answer in your hour of distress. The Bible has much to say about this topic and we're going to jump

in and go as far as we can tonight and we'll pick it up next week if we don't get through it tonight.

I want you to look here in Isaiah 58. The Bible says in verse 1,

1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. 3 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. 4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? 6 Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

Heavenly Father, tonight I pray that as we examine your word, that our hearts would be tender and receptive to the leadership of thy Holy Spirit. Lord, I pray that you might use me as a vessel of your grace and truth and may Jesus be poured out to his people. Lord, be glorified in these moments together for we ask this in the wonderful name of Jesus and for his glory. Amen.

As I have asked you in the beginning of this message how many are carrying a heavy burden and every hand was lifted, every one of us represents a set of burdens. I would imagine that for every hand that was lifted, there are cumulative burdens that if piled up here and we could somehow just for a moment sense the spiritual burden and the weight and the stress represented by those cares, it would be more than we could handle. It would be more than we could ever want to bear and yet the Bible gives us a tool in spiritual warfare and the result of this tool called fasting is found here in this passage of Scripture: to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke. There are those in this room tonight who are facing a mountain of desperation and they find no way over, no way around or underneath, and really what they need for God to do is move that mountain and it seems like the every day ordinary prayer life that they have engaged these problems with, seemed futile beside that mountain of desperation and so you need God to move the oppression and to remove the heavy burden, to break the yoke of bondage, if you would. The Bible tells us that in times like this fasting is definitely in order.

I want us to recognize that fasting is a tool in spiritual warfare and we're going to look at this in later passages but we know that when there was a man whose son was possessed

of a devil and the disciples did not have the ability to cast the devil out of the young man, the man brought his son to the Lord and the Lord rebuked the devil and he fled from the young man, if you recall. And the disciples came to the Lord and they said, "Why could not we cast out this devil?" And the Lord said, "This kind cometh not out but by prayer and fasting." There are burdens, there are circumstances, there are situations of life that may never be overcome apart from prayer and fasting.

Now, as you get into an in-depth study in the word of God of fasting, there were supernatural fasts that allowed someone to go for 40 days and 40 nights with neither food nor water. I'm not suggesting that we try to engage ourselves in a supernatural fast. There were times where fasting was committed to for three days and three nights and that was for an urgent need. And there are some fasts in the Bible that were three days and three nights where they took neither food nor water. Now, they never went beyond that in a fast apart from water unless it was a supernatural fast and the reason being that after 72 hours without water, the body begins to die. There were those that undertook a fast of 7 days, some of 10, some of 14, some of 21, others of 30 days, and some in the Bible of 40 days in length. I think that because we are not immersing ourselves in the Bible, we have different ideas of what constitutes fasting. Sometimes people will tell me, "Pastor, I'm on a juice fast. Or I'm fasting, I'm just taking broth and fruit juice." Can I submit to you tonight that these are not biblical fasts. Biblical fasts were water only. Water only.

I know many people who take the Bible very literally and very seriously when it comes to the matters of spiritual warfare. I'm aware that there are people in this room who have issues involving spiritual warfare that are so deep and so strong that they want to approach the conflict recognizing they "wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places." They recognize that the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 10 that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds." And what we see there is that the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly weapons, they are spiritual weapons to pull down strongholds that have been erected by the destroyer, the devil himself. And there are people in this room who are fighting what they see as an insurmountable foe and there are strongholds in their mind and in their thought processes that may only be brought down through a spiritual weaponry and so tonight I want to address the subject of fasting for the Bible has much to say about this. The people of God were deemed prophesied against the people of Israel by Jeremiah and the Lord said, "I want you to cry aloud and lift up your voice and be like a trumpet and show my people their transgressions," and what happened was they were taking spiritual things like prayer and fasting as something to be dealt with lightheartedly or casually. They said that they had prayed, they sought him daily and yet despite the fact that they sought the Lord daily, nothing was happening. Despite the fact that they prayed and fasted, guess what? Nothing was happening because they did not fast according to the way that God had determined for them too fast.

I want us to notice some things here and if you would, keep your marker in chapter 58 of Isaiah and if you would go with me to Psalm 109. Psalm 109 and I want us to notice an aspect of fasting that is brought out in this passage of Scripture because this is a

foundational tenet of the subject. Now listen, I would rather practice feasting, not fasting, but you know, I realize that there are some things that are so urgent that they require some serious spiritual devotion and in Psalm 109:24 the Bible says, "My knees are weak through fasting; and my flesh faileth of fatness." The Psalmist knew what it was to fast, in fact he said he had afflicted his soul through fasting. I want us to notice that, first of all, fasting involves denial. It involves denial. Fasting is really a denial of all fleshly pleasures. A denial of all fleshly pleasures. Of course, we automatically default to the fact that it involves a denial of the pleasure of food. That goes kind of along with our thought processes on the subject of fasting and so it is a denial of food.

It came to the place with the Psalmist that he had fasted to the extent that it made him weak. Now, there are those in this room that could testify to having gone through a biblical fast and, in fact, it does do that for you. There have been a number of times where I have fasted for a 14 day period, others of 10, others 7, many many times 3 day fasts, oftentimes a 24 hour fast and giving myself to prayer concerning things that were in front of me that I needed to hear from heaven on and I needed to be serious enough that I was going to deny all fleshly pleasure so that my body could be in tune to the still small voice of God. My mind, my body, my soul and my spirit was engaged in hearing from heaven and so at meal times, morning, noon and night, instead of feasting on food, feasting on manna from heaven, digging into the bread that God has given us in his word and the Lord said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God shall man live." Giving yourself to the things of God, feasting on spiritual food, it involves a denial of food.

It also involves a denial of sensual pleasure. The Lord, if you would, flip back to Isaiah 58, did not have regard unto the fast, the days when the children of Israel fasted, and the Bible tells us exactly why. He says in verse 3, they are asking, "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure." In other words what the Lord is saying is, "Yes, you went for a season of time without food but you still found other forms of physical pleasure to take the place of the pleasure that you would have derived from having a healthy, hardy, delicious meal." In other words, if they liked to do archery, they went out and they shot their bow and arrow for fun on that day. If they liked to do target practice, they might have been fasting but they went out and they took target practice. They enjoyed doing that. Maybe they liked to read novels and instead of reading the Bible, they read a novel. Even though they were going without food, the Lord said, "I'm not hearkening unto the day of your fast because although you went without food, you still chose to take pleasure in your flesh in the day of your fast." So fasting involves a denial of fleshly pleasure and desires, of course for food, but also sensual desires in the life.

That is borne out in 1 Corinthians 7 and I want you to notice this because the Bible is so filled with information on this subject. In 1 Corinthians 7, the Bible says this in verse 5, talking about the physical relationship, physical intimacy between a man and wife. It says, "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to," what? "Fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you

not for your incontinency," or your lack of self-control. So what is being put forward here by the Apostle Paul is that the very same thing that God said to the children of Israel in Isaiah 58, that in the day of your fast you take no physical pleasure and so that would mean the denial of sensual pleasure in the life. So if I'm fasting or if I determine to fast, I'm going to enter into the day of the fast with the knowledge and mutual consent of my bride because marriage is a melding of two lives into one spiritually. "Two saith he shall be one flesh." And so because we are one, God has dictated that if one or the other of us feel the need to fast and pray, that we're going to commune with our partner and we're going to do so by consent and agree that we are going to cooperate in this as a partnership and that we will not seek pleasure in the fast days. So fasting involves a denial of food, it involves a denial of sensual pleasure, if you would.

Turn over to Daniel 6. By the way, when I began to study in depth about biblical fasting, I realized how few people ever really practice biblical fasting. In fact, I would say less than 1% of Christian people ever experience a biblical fast, less than 1%. I've had people just flat out tell me, "I've never fasted because I don't like feeling hungry." You know, that's like saying, Brother Mark saying, "You know, I'm not going to have surgery because I don't like pain." Well listen, you can have a little bit of pain for a short period of time or you can have a whole lot of pain for the rest of your life. What would you pick, right? So hopefully this is going to help him to be pain-free so he had to experience some discomfort now so that later on that burden could be lifted from him, and it's the same principle in spiritual warfare. I'm not just living for the moment, how do I feel today, I'm living for how can the yoke be lifted so that I can breathe free tomorrow and for many days thereafter and specifically in the areas for which I'm praying.

But in Daniel 6, we find another principle found concerning biblical fasting and we're dealing here with Daniel being thrown in the lion's den and Darius had a friendship with Daniel and was troubled that he was ensnared and forced to have to throw his friend Daniel into the lion's den. In verse 18, here's what happened after Darius threw Daniel into the lion's den, "Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of musick brought before him: and his sleep went from him." In other words, he didn't listen to music to try to find comfort for his disturbed spirit and he sought no comfort in sleep. Do you know what I have discovered in this day and time? That there are folks who fall into depression because of burdens in their lives and one of the outlets that they use to deal with the burdens in their life is the outlet of sleep. There are many people in this room that on mornings where you wake up and you're afflicted in your spirit, you're tempted to pull the covers over your head, to draw the blinds and let the world go away and pray for sleep to come so that you can deal with the burdens in that sort of way. But friends, fasting, I believe, involves a denial of food, it involves a denial of sensual pleasure, and at times it will involve the denial of sleep whereby that we on purpose determine to take times that are dedicated to physical rest to seek the presence of the Lord and to know the heart and the mind of God on a specific matter. When the world may be sleeping, the Lord is awake and in tune to the need and the cry of your heart and the Bible says that the Lord "is nigh unto all them that are of a broken heart and to all those that are of a contrite spirit." And sometimes when we come to the Lord with brokenness of heart in the midnight watches, it is then that we sense the very real

presence of God, but not many people are willing to afflict themselves to the extent that they would give up sleep when their body is yearning for it; they would give up food when their body is hungering for it; where they would give up sensual pleasures when they want to be pleased and entertained with the things that would satisfy their senses.

And friends, the Bible is very clear. Psalm 35, if you would. Psalm 35 concerning this subject of fasting. Psalm 35, the Bible says this in verse 13, "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom." Now, do you notice that fasting is not just a denial of food, not just a denial of sensual pleasure, it's not just a denial of sleep, it's a denial of self. Do you know what the Lord said? "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

We heard a couple of Sundays ago on the 23rd a sermon, "I Have Issues," and in that sermon we looked at James 4 and the Bible says that God "resisteth the proud and gives grace to the humble." When you go to the Lord in prayer and fasting, you're crying out to him saying, "I have no power over this situation and I'm afflicting my soul. I need God's grace." None of us can come and say, "I deserve the answer from heaven." Any answer that would be forthcoming would only be grace poured out from the throne room to God's people and the Bible says God resists the proud, he gives grace to the humble and so fasting of necessity involves not just denial of food, not just denial of sleep, not just denial of pleasure, not just the denial of worldly things but a denial of self. I'm saying, "The things that I want, the things that I feel I need, I'm laying that all aside. There's nothing in the world more important to me, God, at this moment than this and I can do nothing about it. I'm throwing myself at the mercy of God. I'm humbling myself before you because I need your grace. I need your grace."

I'm going to tell you something: this is no fun. It's not. Whenever a church starts charging the gates of hell, whenever a people determine to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit of God in their life, to boldly give a witness for Christ, what will inevitably come behind that is the opposition of the evil one, the destroyer. He will engage us in spiritual warfare and he doesn't fight fair. He'll hit you where it hurts the most and it will put you in a place of absolute humiliation before the Lord and you'll recognize there will come moments in your life where you are impotent to do anything except throw yourself at the mercy of God, and there are few things that will humble you and prostrate you before God like fasting.

Now, some people say, "Well, you know, pastor, I can't fast. I have health issues." There are things you can do. I realize that if you have hypoglycemia and you could go into hypoglycemic coma, that that's a danger for you. I'm not suggesting that you give up on food if you have a physical condition that would jeopardize your life. Most of us don't have that issue. Speaking for myself, I could probably stand to go many days without food and I would be fine, but there are things that you can do. You could put down the clicker. You could put down the game. You could put down the crossword puzzle. You could turn off the computer. You could put down the telephone. You could put down the novel from Reader's Digest or the newspaper. You could cut out the game shows. You

could give yourself three times a day to the Lord of God in prayer. You could cut out the walk with the dog and walk with the Lord. There are things that you could do if we were really serious about hearing from heaven; if we were really serious about conquest in spiritual warfare.

I could talk to you tonight all about the implements of spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6, you know, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the girdle of truth, feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, praying with all supplication in the Spirit, 6:18, but that praying with all supplication in the Spirit, I will never be in the Spirit until I am emptied of me because until I am emptied of self, I cannot be filled with him. And one of the means spiritually of accomplishing that is by means of fasting. Nobody likes to feel hungry. In fact, a lot of times when you go on a protracted fast and it's water only, you think you're going to die about the first seven days and then you're pretty sure you're going to die after about the eighth day, then about the tenth day it doesn't hurt anymore, you're just weak, your voice is kind of diminished in strength. And most people that fast, they get to that point, battle pride worse than they battle anything else because they feel like that they are somehow on some supernatural ground that gives them status above anybody else because they are doing something that no one else is willing to do and they are lifted up with pride in their hearts and at that moment in time, you may as well just quit because it is self-defeating. God resists the proud.

He says, "When you fast," to his people, "you exact your labors." In other words, because you're physically weak, you don't keep the same schedule that you would customarily try to keep because you want people to know that you're fasting, or because you're trying to give your flesh a break, give quarter to your body. I had a pastor friend who for a long time whenever he would fast, he said one of the simple pleasures that he took on the day of his fast he realized was a hot shower. It felt good to his body and he said he realized that he was taking too much pleasure spending a few minutes too long in the shower trying to seek some comfort on the day of a fast and so he determined that he would only take a tepid shower and stay for a few moments only long enough to cleanse his body. That's serious spiritual warfare.

You say, "What would dictate the need for such extreme measures?" Well, there was a man whose son was possessed of a devil and if you've got a grandson or a son that's full of the devil, he may not be possessed by a devil, per se, but the devil is messing around with them wanting to destroy him; you've got a grandson or a granddaughter that's wayward, breaking your heart; you've got a financial catastrophe, train wreck in front of you, to remove the heavy burden, to break the yoke of bondage, that might be something that you would consider fasting for. Do you have a loved one that does not know the Lord as Savior and their body is wracked with illness? I think that's a circumstance that would call for fasting. We're going to look at some of these circumstances as we go down through this, probably next Wednesday we'll be able to hold service in the men's room because this is an unpopular subject. But listen, I know people that are in terrible physical pain, do you? How many of you know someone who is in terrible physical pain? And if they thought a certain surgery or procedure that would hospitalize them for a while or lay

them up for a while would give them some relief, they would gladly do it. John Shoals, he's been a postman for the better part of three decades here and wore his hips out carrying a mailbag and it hurt him just to take a step. I used to see him walking into church and I could just see he was in pain. So do you know what? He just had his hip replaced. Do you know why? He was willing to go through temporary pain and discomfort to be freed from that burden of pain. Now, if he was to look at a video of surgeries, maybe he did, and understand all of the possible risks involved, I don't know if he could bear that but all he had his eye on was the fact that, "If I go through this, I'm going to be able to have some years free from that pain, free from that burden." And some of you have got burdens that are not physical, they're emotional, they're spiritual, they may be physical, and if you thought God could deliver you, you'd be willing to go through some difficulty to see God accomplish the miraculous in your life.

I believe that. I've got six kids. I can tell you that I have fasted for more than one of them. Many of you have too for yours. We're going to talk about this matter of fasting as it relates to spiritual warfare over the next Wednesday's. I don't know how long this will take me but I want to make sure that when we come to the end of this month, we know what it is to pray really and to see it as a tool in spiritual warfare and that we thoroughly examine the subject of fasting, not so that we can boast in ourselves that we know something or we do something that someone else may not do, but so that we can see it as a useful tool that God has placed in the hand of the believer for difficult circumstances.

The Lord said, "Howbeit this kind cometh not out but by prayer and fasting." Have you got a tough situation? Stay dialed in here. Same place, same channel next week, okay? SermonAudio, stay dialed in, same channel next week and we'll get through this.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you tonight for your word and I pray that you would use this truth to affect a supernatural change and may all the glory be yours for we pray these things in the wonderful name of Jesus. Amen.

God bless you. You're dismissed.