

Fasting | Part Three: To Amplify Our Prayers

Teaching:

Intro hook:

- May, 1940. The Nazis have just overrun France. 338,000 Allied troops in retreat are trapped on the beach at Dunkirk.
- There is no hope of rescue in time. The British Prime Minister **Winston Churchill** is gearing up for the annihilation of the British army, the last defense between England and the Third Reich's blitzkrieg advance.
- But then, on Friday, May 24th, Hitler issues a baffling order to his generals to stop their assault. The German tank division stops just ten miles away from Dunkirk.
- Then the city is enveloped in a strange mist that's a mix of fog and smoke, and the German Luftwaffe can't bomb the soldiers, who are like sitting ducks on the beach.
- Then, even stranger, the English Channel, notorious for high winds and choppy waters, is perfectly calm for three days; historians say "like bathwater." Which makes it possible for hundreds of small, civilian boats, to cross the channel and rescue the troops under the fog.
- This story was made famous yet again by the director **Christopher Nolan's** 2017 film **Dunkirk**. But what's not in that film, is that also on Friday, May 24th, King George, upon hearing the news of the impending invasion, called the nation to a day of fasting and prayer.
- Tens of thousands of people literally lined up to get into **Westminster Abby** in London to plead for God's mercy.
- Just *hours* after **King George** called for prayer, Hitler ordered his tank division to stop; and over the next three days, all 338,000 troops were saved.
- That generation did not call it "Dunkirk," they called it "the miracle of Dunkirk."
- The outcome of which arguably saved the whole of England.

Seam: Now, was it a miracle? Or just a coincidence? God's response to prayer and fasting? Or just poor strategic planning by the German army?

Prayer and fasting:

- Here's what I know for sure: all through the library of Scripture prayer and fasting go together.
- You can pray without fasting, and you can fast without praying, but when you combine the two, it's like there's a chemical reaction that amplifies the power of prayer.

Seam: Now we come to number three of the four reasons we fast.

Recap and set up:

- In week one, we covered: to offer ourselves to Jesus
- In week two, to grow in holiness.
- Next up for week three is: to amplify our prayers.
- Prayer is an umbrella term used all through Scripture for the medium by which we communicate and commune with God.
- You can break down prayer into two basic categories: listening to God, and speaking to God.
- Fasting is a powerful practice that amplifies both God's voice to us and our voice to God.

Sticky line: Put another way: *fasting is a way to hear God, and to be heard by God.*

Seam: A word on each. First...

1. To hear God

Turn: Please turn in your Bibles to **Acts 13**.

- In Acts 13 [on screen: **Acts 13v1-3**] we read a fascinating story about the first disciples of Jesus:
 - Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

- Notice, it's as they are fasting that the voice of God comes with clear direction.
- This has been my experience, along with countless of followers of Jesus: in times of fasting and waiting on God for direction, that's when I'm most likely to hear God's voice.
 - Just the other day a good friend of mine was telling me he did a four day fast to pray for God's direction for his business; as he was fasting, he had an idea come to him, and on the last day of the fast, he got a call out of the blue from an old colleague asking if he would be interested in the very same idea.
 - He took that as God's direction.
 - And it was while he was praying and *fasting*.

(Break for body)

- Now, let's take a step back and talk for a minute about what's happening in our body as we fast...
- (Remember, we're chipping away at the false-dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual; we are whole persons; what we do with our body has an effect on our soul.)
- In the last session, we covered some of the ways that fasting is good for your physical health, but it's also good for your *mental* health. Peer reviewed studies on fasting have demonstrated that:
 - Fasting increases the blood flow to your brain, causing you to be more alert and aware; compared to eating, which causes blood to flow to your digestive system, which is why we are tired and a bit cloudy of mind after a large meal. Think of the post Christmas dinner fugue.
 - It also increases neuroplasticity, the ability for your brain to make new neural connections.
 - It's also proven to decrease the neurotransmitters that signal anxiety and depression, and increase those that elevate calm and a sense of well-being.
 - It's also been proven to increase what doctors call "interoception"; which is your ability to accurately notice what's happening inside your body and mind.
 - It's even been shown in some studies to arrest or even reverse the effects of Alzheimer's!
- It comes as no surprise that fasting is not an exclusively Christian practice. While the first

recorded story of fasting as a spiritual discipline is of Moses on Mount Sinai, it's later adopted by Confucius in China, the Yogis in India, pretty much all of the Greek Philosophers — Plato, Socrates, Aristotle — were advocates of fasting. It plays a central role in Islam. Not to mention the explosion of popularity of intermittent fasting among those in the health and wellness community, or it's practice by writers and intellectuals for many years due to its effect on mental prowess.

- Because fasting is a way of honing your mind to a point of alertness, focus, and perception.
 - Now, to repeat, this doesn't happen overnight. If you are new to fasting, and especially if your regular diet is high in sugar and refined grains, then at first, you may get a headache or feel dizzy.
 - But if you stay with your practice and make it a regular part of your Rule of Life, your body will adapt; and when you fast, you will start to feel calm, but also highly alert and attuned.

(Back to teaching)

- You can easily see how all this would put your mind and body into an ideal state to hear God's voice.
- Not to mention that when you fast, you have a lot more *time*.
 - One of the first things you realize when you start fasting is just how much time, energy, and mental attention goes to food — grocery shopping, cooking, eating, cleaning up — you get a lot of time and head space back when you fast.
- As **Priscilla Shirer** said of her practice of fasting:
 - “I’m able to gain perspective on how unbalanced is the amount of time, energy and effort that I put into my body and into my Spirit. ... When we choose to sacrifice a need of a body to place more importance on a need of the spirit, God Himself sits up and takes notice. The heavens are opened to us in a way that might not have otherwise been.
- She offers a key insight here: not only does fasting put us in an ideal position to listen, but it also puts God into an ideal situation to speak.
- Not only is our mind attentive, but our heart is humble and hungry.
- I think of God's word to Israel through the prophet Joel: (**Joel 2v12-15**)
 - “Even now,” declares the LORD,

“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

- Or through the prophet Jeremiah: (**Jeremiah 29v12-14**)

- “You will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD.
- Jeremiah doesn’t specifically mention fasting, but he uses the same phrase: “all your heart.” Fasting is one way to seek God “with all your heart.”
- Again, it comes as no surprise that all through Scripture and church history there are stories of people fasting to hear God’s voice of direction, or for what the NT writers later call “discernment.”
- When we are facing a major decision, and especially in situations where we don’t know what to do, my wife and I will set aside a few days to pray and fast.
 - If possible, we take time in silence and solitude or go on retreat — to get away from the noise and distraction. But if that’s not possible, because of parenting or work or life circumstances, we just get up early, and the time that we would have spent eating or sleeping to digest all that food, we give to listening prayer.
 - Praying with the Psalmist, “Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.” (**Psalm 143v8**)
- This discipline of fasting and listening for God’s voice is a part of the larger movement in the spiritual journey from decision making to discernment.
- From, “What’s a good and wise decision to make my life better?” to “What is the will of God for my life?”
- Which is part of an even deeper movement of the spiritual journey from control to surrender.
- From, “I am in control of my life.” To “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be done to me according to your word.”
- Fasting is a discipline by which we open our body and soul to God’s Spirit to facilitate these essential movements deep inside our being.

Seam: *But, it's not just to hear God; it's also to be heard by God...*

To be heard by God

- God hears our prayer, whether we are fasting or not; but there's *something* about fasting that seems to amplify our prayers before God.
- Look again at **Acts 13** if your Bible is still open...
 - (**Acts 13v3**) "So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."
- They fasted to hear, but also to be heard...
- This is one of the primary reasons we fast, as God said through the prophet Isaiah, for "your voice to be heard on high." (**Isaiah 58v4**) Or that can be translated, "to make your voice heard in heaven." (NET)
- Do you ever feel stuck in prayer? Like there's a wall between you and God or God's power? Like you just can't break through the wall?
- As the preacher **Tony Evans** put it, "Fasting helps us to activate God's power."
- To break through, or as my Pentecostal brothers and sisters say, to "pray through" all that stands between you and God's plans, purposes, and power for your life.
- Now, we have to be careful here.
- Fasting is not a hunger strike to pressure God to give into our demands. We're not Gandhi up against the British Empire; we're sons and daughters of a loving Father.
- And yet — back to the line from the prophet Jeremiah, you will "find me when you seek me with *all* your heart" (**Jeremiah 29v13**) — there is something about the seeking and finding that God really seems to find value in.
- There's a lot of mystery here — Scripture tells us *what* — when we add fasting to prayer there is a higher correlation between our requests and the release of God's power, but it doesn't tell us *why*, at least not clearly.
- Different streams of the church have different theories as to why.
 - My *theory* is it's because God is relational; his ultimate aim is to draw us into the inner life of the trinity; prayer with fasting takes us deeper into union with God. As we said in the last session, it burns away whatever is creating relational distance between us and God.
- You may have another take, but while there's a diverse array of theological opinions in the

church of Jesus on why some prayers are answered and others are not, one thing is very clear in Scripture: God responds to prayer and fasting.

- I think of the story in **Jonah 3**, where the city of Nineveh is warned by the prophet Jonah of its coming destruction, but then we read: (**Jonah 3v5-10**)
 - The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth... When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.
- There's a play on words that's lost in translation from Hebrew to English. In the closing line, the phrase "turned from their evil ways" and "relented" are the same word in **Hebrew — naham**. Which means, to repent, or relent, or change your mind.
- The text literally reads, "When God saw that they **naham-ed**, he *naham-ed*."
- What does it mean for God to *naham*, a word that's often translated "repent"?
- **Arthur Wallis**, in **God's Chosen Fast**, our recommended reading for the practice, insightfully writes this:
 - "Because man repents in respect to sin, God repents in respect to judgment. ... Man's change of heart makes it morally possible for God to behave differently towards him, yet acting consistently with his holy character and principles."
- We often mistakenly assume that God is going to do what God is going to do with or without our prayers, but the pattern you read of all through Scripture is that when God's people pray and especially when they fast, he responds.
- Jonah is one such story. But Scripture is *full* of stories like it - King Jehosaphat, Esther, the church in Antioch, and many more, etc.

Ending:

- All that to say, when it comes to hearing and being heard by God; not only is fasting an aid to prayer, it's an *amplifier* of prayer. And a powerful one at that.
- But remember: the end goal of prayer is not ultimately to get what we want from God; but to get God himself. It's union; it's to enter the inner life of the trinity, to hear the Father and Son and Spirit speak their love over you; and to speak back your love in return.
- So, when you need to hear God, or you need to be *heard* by God... Practice fasting.