

The month of

prayer & fasting

January 2022

14 Day Devotional



SOUTHLAND
CHURCH

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Versions of scripture quotations are noted.

DAY 1 - WHY PRAY? TO BRING US TO GOD FOR OUR NEEDS

At its core prayer is very much a cry for help. So much can happen in life where we end up stuck or need assistance. And our current circumstances can contain challenges that cause us to wonder about the certainty or stability of our futures. What are we to do in such situations? Well, the apostle Paul encouraged believers of Jesus to pray in order to have their needs met, Philippians 4:6 (NIV) Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Sometimes a believer can lack because of an absence of prayer. Or in the words of another early church leader, James 4:2 (NIV) You do not have, because you do not ask God. These are challenging words! There is a connection between asking and receiving!

In his model prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus himself taught the exact same thing, Luke 11:3 (NIV) Give us each day our daily bread. Do you see the pattern here? We pray to have our needs met! Further, God has promised that he will help his children when they ask for support, Matthew 21:22 (NIV) If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

What puzzles many people is that God already knows our needs. In fact, he is already aware of our needs before we know them! Jesus affirmed this when he declared, Matthew 6:8 (NIV) ... for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. It's also true that God intends to give his children good gifts. So why bother asking? What's the point of praying for these needs?

Well, it appears that God decided to tie our needs to prayer BECAUSE of the independent and self-sufficient old nature in us that defaults to doing life apart from God. Can you honestly say that you rely on God for all things? Have you ever felt the pull to drift away from him? Jesus warns that we were never designed to do life apart from our Creator. Pay careful attention to these words, John 15:4 (NIV) Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Many see being "needy" as a negative thing. Obviously, there is an unhealthy form of neediness. However, there is also an incredible type of neediness that spurs on a lifestyle of prayer, where we re-connect with our Father in heaven. Or as one person explained it, "to be in need is to depend. To depend is to desire something more than oneself."



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.*
2. *Write down 2 or 3 examples of when being in need caused you to rely on God.*
3. *Talk to a friend about your answer to Question 2. Ask them to share a time when they were in need and called out to God.*
4. *What is a need that you have in your life right now? Write out a prayer to God, asking him for help.*
5. *Memorize Philippians 4:6.*

DAY 2 - WHY PRAY? TO GROW OUR FAITH IN GOD

Did you know that God is waiting for you to ask him for good things? And as you receive these good things, he desires for you to properly honor him with gratitude and renewed faith and trust? Put another way, prayer can grow our faith in God. Let's see how all of this works!

The New Testament notes that, Hebrews 11:6 (NIV) And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. It's not an overstatement to say that EVERYTHING that you will accomplish as a follower Jesus is linked to your faith in God. Faith is that important!

But how do we get faith or increase our faith? One way is when he speaks to us, or as Paul explains, Romans 10:17 (NIV) Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. And of course, it's in prayer that we often hear him speak (as well as through the Bible, creation, and our consciences).

Another way we acquire and grow in faith is when we experience him! For example, Jesus said that the most important commandment in the entire Bible is, Matthew 22:37 (NIV) Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. What an amazing and important command! But did you know that you'll be unable to love God this way if you haven't experienced that he is wonderful? After all, 1 John 4:19 (NKJV) We love him because he first loved us. What a wonderful truth! Yet how do we first experience him and his love? Through prayer!

A faith that is strong is maintained by walking with God, experiencing him and knowing him. And such things are greatly linked to prayer. Or to look at this from another angle, when God hears and answers your prayers, you'll discover or be reminded that he cares about you and he is good to you. There are even times where he will answer in ways you're not expecting and you'll learn that he is wise beyond measure! In the same way, many who have walked with God for years would like to grow in faith and would see a huge move forward if they cultivate the habit of prayer.

As we pray we'll also end up in awe of his sovereignty – that he is in control of all kinds of events and circumstances. Naturally, all of these things cause us to trust him more, which leads us to worship him with genuine love.

Consider the life of David and how his faith grew as he prayed. In answer to David's cries for help, God enabled him to overcome a lion and a bear. Wow! As a result, when confronted with Goliath, he had great faith! Many believers shrink back in fear when faced with challenges. If they instead would learn to pray, like David, they would see God work. And again, like David, they would then have the faith for greater challenges.

Basically, faith is the basis or foundation for all that pleases God – which is why it's impossible to please God without it! As John Calvin noted, "good things that we do not ask for will usually be interpreted by our hearts as the fruit of our own wisdom and intelligence. That thickens the illusion of self-sufficiency that leads to over confidence and sets us up for failure."



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.*
2. *Write down 1 or 2 examples of when you prayed for something, received it AND your faith increased. If you cannot think of an example or two, ask God to help you remember.*
3. *How would you describe your level of faith right now? Weak? Strong? Strong in some areas, but struggling regarding certain circumstances?*
4. *Review Philippians 4:6.*

DAY 3 - WHY PRAY? TO LOVE AND FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Isn't it amazing that God himself desires to have you love him and be in fellowship with him? What a gift! May we not reject this gift in any way! There is a thread running through the entire Bible that highlights this truth. It's important to acknowledge this but even better is to take advantage of this offer AS MUCH as possible.

Early on in the Bible we're told that there were people such as Enoch. It says about him, Genesis 5:22, 24 (NIV) And after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters ... Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away. What a powerful description of someone who loved God! As it says in the New Testament, Hebrews 11:5 (NIV) By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. What a legacy Enoch has left! Enoch was ultimately known not for what he did, but for his fellowship and love of God.

How can we love God in a way that also results in such a legacy? How can we walk with God? Again, this is where prayer comes in! We're going to look at many verses again in this section, but don't skip over them (this can become a poor habit). Let their words speak to you about God's invitation and expectation to love him through prayer!

David did pray for many things, yet a key thing he desired was to gaze on the beauty of the Lord. He described it this way, Psalm 27:4 (NIV) One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. In another place he prayed, Psalm 63:1 (NIV) Oh God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

David saw prayer as one way to seek God, to know him, to be close to him. This is God's desire for ALL believers, not only for those who are more emotional or relationally inclined! The book of John affirms this, John 17:3 (NIV) Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. Please note – it says that the goal is to know him, not simply to know about him. Would this describe your life? Prayer will help you reach this beautiful goal!

Consider how Paul points us to the same thing, 1 Corinthians 1:9 (NIV) God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. Fellowship is a rarely used word but points to a close partnership. It is God's way of saying to us, "how I long to be close to you, to have you walk with me, just as men such as Enoch and David did." John doesn't hesitate to boldly proclaim, 1 John 1:3 (NIV) And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

This fellowship, found in prayer, is so powerful that people then begin to experience him. And this washes away doubts regarding his reality! Some struggle to get over doubts and think that simply studying more will help them believe. While study has its place, the strongest foundation will be built by tasting and seeing that the Lord is real and good!

Fellowship also adds joy to our lives. Peter said, 1 Peter 1:8 (NIV) Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. This joy is one of the “bonus blessings” you’ll receive when you love God and fellowship with him through prayer. Wow!

Jesus invites every believer and church to open the doors of their hearts so that he can meet with them. This is one of the gifts of prayer. As he declares to the church of Laodicea, Revelation 3:20 (NIV) Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today’s reading.*
2. *Does your prayer time ever include simply loving God and fellowshiping with him? Describe what this looks like for you.*
3. *Ask God to show you anything that hinders you from fellowshiping with him. Write it down. Then respond with any necessary confession.*
4. *If something was revealed in Question 3, ask God to show you any steps you can take to move ahead in fellowshiping with God. This is a great goal to have!*

DAY 4 - WHY PRAY? TO CHANGE US

God's call in our lives is for us to change. It's clear throughout the Bible. While we do receive the gift of eternal life by grace, there is still work to be done. But what kind of work? The work of becoming more like Jesus!

God knew who would eventually belong to him and Paul informs us that one of God's goals for us is to be like Jesus. In his own words he declares, Romans 8:29 (NIV) For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. Don't you think it would be honoring to God if we embraced one of his goals for us, to become more like Jesus? Of course!

But how do we change? Prayer certainly helps us in this regard, in two ways at least.

First: as we pray, our desires are replaced by his desires

One of the most amazing promises in the Bible proclaims, Psalm 37:4 (NIV) Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Wow! This is incredible! However, many get frustrated and conclude – "he doesn't give me the desires of my heart!" Well, the problem isn't with prayer but that our desires can be misguided.

Of course, some may not care and just give up on prayer. This is sad! But if we DO care about God's kingdom, we'll let him adjust our desires through prayer. This is a huge part of what it means to delight in the Lord. Isaiah, for example, was profoundly changed by his encounter with God in prayer. Take the time to reflect on what we're told,

Isaiah 6:1-7 (NIV) In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Isaiah saw the holiness of God and immediately recognized his own sin and his desire became this – "God, make me holy. Take away my uncleanness!" In the book of Philippians Paul says this about our desires, Philippians 2:13 (NLT) For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him. Where does this desire come from? In part, through prayer.

Second: as we pray, our perspective and understanding are exchanged for his

In Psalm 73 you can read how David struggles with his perspective on the wicked. He said that they were calloused, proud, arrogant, mistreated people and have no regard for anyone else. And YET, they still prosper! David was envious and it seemed unfair to him.

We may feel the same! But then something happened in David's heart and mind. He says that all this troubled him greatly UNTIL, Psalm 73:17 (NIV) ... I entered the sanctuary; then I understood their final destiny. Wow! Now that is the fruit of prayer!

David had been mad, frustrated and discouraged. Or in his own words, Psalm 73:21-22 (NIV) When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. However, AFTER prayer he was restored to peace because God had given David a fresh perspective. How we all need this at times!

Another example can be found in the life of Peter. We're told in the book of Acts that Peter was praying at noon when he was suddenly confronted by a vision that challenged his thinking about Gentiles (non-Jews) in God's kingdom. Though he didn't fully comprehend the meaning of the vision instantly, God continued to orchestrate events to adjust his understanding and perspective. In fact, we can say that it was Peter's habit of prayer that led to this change and allowed him to be a significant part of God's purposes.



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.*
2. *Can you think of 1 or 2 times when you had a certain desire, but prayer changed your desire?*
3. *Spend some time writing down some of your strongest desires currently. Then spend some time in prayer and ask God – "God, are these desires that I have your desires? Is there anything you would like to say to change my perspective or understanding?"*

DAY 5 - WHY PRAY? TO HELP US RESIST TEMPTATION

Becoming a follower of Jesus does not eliminate temptation from our lives! Certainly you've already discovered this reality. Jesus himself was perfect, yet even he was tempted. The author of Hebrews reveals this about him, Hebrews 4:15 (NIV) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.

Paul was also tempted. He admits, 1 Corinthians 7:9 (NIV) Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? We can be encouraged that our temptations to sin are not unusual. Paul further noted, 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. It certainly doesn't help if we scold ourselves when we're tempted! God knows that we carry this burden.

However, while temptation IS common, sin is to decrease in our lives! We're to "grow up." Or as Peter tells us, 1 Peter 2:2 (NIV) Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation ... Growing up in our salvation includes learning to say "no" to the many temptations we face.

Prayer – praise God! – can assist us in resisting temptation. This is why Jesus told his disciples in the garden before his suffering and death, Matthew 26:41 (NIV) Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak. They would be facing a great test as their teacher, leader and friend was to be taken away from them! Nevertheless, the boldness they required to keep from yielding to fear was at their disposal, IF they kept watch and in prayer.

This is due to the fact that all we need to resist temptation is found in abiding in Jesus. We saw in Hebrews that Jesus was also tempted yet it concludes that he "was without sin." Paul even tells us that not only is sin common, but adds, 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. What a promise!

It's not an overstatement to say that when we give in to temptation it's a reflection of our need to grow in prayer. While the disciples ended up failing in the garden, they did learn. Later on Luke records an incident in Acts in which Peter and John had been arrested by the Sanhedrin (the religious leadership of the time) for proclaiming to people that Jesus had risen from the dead (see Acts 4:1-3). After threatening them, the Sanhedrin released them with the instruction not to speak about Jesus.

How did they handle this order to be quiet? It would've been tempting to obey! Well, they turned to prayer and overcame this temptation! Consider their prayer request, Acts 4:29-30 (NIV) Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.*
2. *Write down 1 or 2 examples of when you were tempted, but you turned to prayer and were able to avoid falling into sin. Ask God to help you remember any examples.*
3. *What temptation or temptations are common in your life right now? Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you overcome. You can also ask him for perspective on why you have the struggle and any steps you can take to help you overcome.*
4. *Memorize Matthew 26:41.*

DAY 6 - WHY PRAY? TO STRENGTHEN US FOR BATTLE

In Ephesians Chapter 6 Paul teaches about spiritual warfare. Why? Because every person is in a spiritual battle, whether they acknowledge it or not. It's a part of being human! Of course, we don't want to lose any battles. Losing is hard and the consequences can be severe!

To win such battles, Paul challenges and teaches us, Ephesians 6:10-11 (NIV) Finally, be strong in the Lord and his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. Paul then explains that the armor consists of things such as: truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, etc.

In fact, these are the glorious riches he refers to in Chapter 3 of the same book of the Bible, which make us strong. He says, Ephesians 3:16 (NIV) I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

Really, it's often in prayer that we access these "riches" that help us battle. No wonder prayer is so important! For example, consider the degree to which joy can help us stand strong. As one Old Testament leader proclaimed, Nehemiah 8:10 (NIV) Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. It's God's joy that can give us life and energy, allowing us to carry on and persevere in the battle.

What about hope? This is another treasure that is given to us in prayer. Everyone has experienced the truth that, Proverbs 13:12 (NIV) Hope deferred makes the heart sick ... Jeremiah the prophet further linked hope and strength when he said, Lamentations 3:18 (NIV) My strength and my hope have perished from the LORD.

When we go to prayer, suddenly we can be filled with the power of God again! Paul refers to such a filling when he prays, Romans 15:13 (NIV) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Spirit. Did you notice what it says? You can OVERFLOW with hope by the power of the Spirit. Is not such a person ready for battle then?

The Bible and many believers throughout history testify to the same thing – the battle belongs to the Lord and we're accessing his power WHEN we engage in lives of prayer! We receive all the glorious riches which we need for life and godliness through abiding in Jesus, which is always enhanced by prayer.

Why wouldn't we go to him for this help? Why not become a person who is a victor in Jesus? This is possible for those who are both new and maturing in their faith.

After describing everything we're to hold on to in the spiritual armor passage of Ephesians Chapter 6, Paul ends by telling us how to do it: pray, pray and pray (see Ephesians 6:18-19). It would be very prideful and foolish of us to try to win the battle any other way. Finally, we also know that Jesus received his own strength from prayer, as we're told that, Luke 5:16 (NIV) ... Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your own words, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.*
2. *Is there anywhere in your life right now that feels like a spiritual battle, where you're under attack? This could be at home, at work, in your extended family, in your areas of ministry. Ask God to reveal to you anything you might be missing. Write down whatever you sense. If you're married, ask your spouse the same questions.*
3. *Do you feel weary or discouraged? Are you ready for further battles? Spend some time in prayer, asking God to strengthen you. As you pray, choose to believe that God will answer this prayer according to his will.*
4. *Review Matthew 26:41.*

DAY 7 - WHY PRAY? TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN KINGDOM ADVANCEMENT

If we believe that God is sovereign, why bother praying? Many believers have wrestled with this question. Thankfully, there is a clear biblical answer. And this answer is linked to God's original plan when he created Adam and Eve.

God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the entire earth, including animals (see Genesis 1:26-27). The early parts of our Bibles really emphasize this truth. Even in the Psalms we read about humanity that, Psalm 8:6-8 (NIV) You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. The Hebrew word translated "ruler" here indicates that Adam, Eve and their descendants were God's managers.

Another passage reveals, Psalm 115:16 (NIV) The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man. Here the Hebrew word translated as "given" means "to assign." God didn't give away ownership of the earth BUT he did assign responsibility to humanity to govern it. What a responsibility! Therefore, Adam and Eve were to represent the will of God on earth. Therefore, how things went on earth, for better or worse, largely depended on the offspring of Adam and Eve.

This is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God's kingdom would come. Such prayer is connected to the responsibility of humanity to be God's managers on earth. In fact, there are MANY specific prayers that relate to this responsibility!

Doesn't Jesus tell us to ask for daily bread, even though he knows our needs before we ask? Didn't Jesus tell his followers to ask for laborers to be sent into the harvest, yet the Lord of the harvest would desire this even more than we do? Didn't Paul ask for prayer that the Word would spread rapidly (see 2 Thessalonians 3:1), even though God was planning this?

What about the ministry of Elijah? If you read 1 Kings Chapters 17 and 18, you'll see how God used him. For example, Elijah prayed seven times for rain to come after a seven-year drought. The book of James mentions this occasion as well and we know from that account that not only did Elijah's prayers bring rain, they had also stopped the rain three years earlier!

Of course, God's will is always for his power and wisdom to be revealed, yet it took Elijah's prayers to fulfill this will before the Israelites and king Ahab. As James proclaims, James 5:17-18 (NIV) Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

What about Abraham's insistent prayer for God's mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah? This had an impact, in that Lot and his family were spared. There are many, many examples in the Bible of prayer advancing God's kingdom and purposes. Moses, Daniel, Paul, Peter, Jeremiah – they all noticed that prayer is the responsibility of God's people in connection with the original call of humanity to be managers or stewards on earth. What a privilege!

Will we participate in this work more actively? Will we do our part? It's clear that our prayers do make a difference. Many wonder – what is my purpose? Well, prayer is a huge part of the answer! Praise God!



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. *In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.*
2. *Spend some time reflecting on this question. If God's kingdom advances, what would this look like in your life, your home, your church and your community? Write down a list.*
3. *Look at the list you created in Question 2. Systematically spend some time praying for God's kingdom to come in these areas. Try to extend this prayer time. If you're unsure how to pray, ask the Holy Spirit to help you.*
4. *Contact another believer and ask them how they feel God's kingdom could come increasingly in their life. Then pray for their request.*

DAY 8 - WHY PRAY? TO RECEIVE SPECIFIC DIRECTION FOR LIVING AND MINISTERING

Yesterday, we saw that prayer can advance God's kingdom. Again, praise God for this incredible opportunity! Today, we focus on the reality that at times we need to take specific actions in obedience to God, as we live and minister.

But what actions? Life is full of opportunities, challenges, and demands. Do you ever feel crushed by how much you have to do? Do you ever feel paralyzed by the possibilities? Thankfully, prayer has also been given to us to sort through the options. As soldiers of Jesus (2 Timothy 2:3) we have somewhere to go to receive marching orders.

We need to be humble and admit that we're not omniscient (all knowing), like God. Even Elijah, who we mentioned yesterday, first heard from God about the plans for no rain and then for a return of rain. Yes, he had to pray to advance God's cause, but it wasn't his idea in the first place.

In fact, it becomes perfectly clear in the next chapter who it is that's directing the entire operation. We read that, 1 Kings 18:1 (NIV) After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."

This habit and necessity of receiving direction for life and ministry is highlighted frequently in the Bible. If it's in there, book after book, may it also be in our lives! Peter ended up being open to ministry to the Gentiles because of God's specific direction in his life. What if he hadn't been praying or open to specific direction? Yes, God still would have accomplished his purposes, but what a loss it would have been for Peter!

And what about Phillip? The angel of the Lord told him to leave a very successful ministry among the Samaritans and go to the desert. We're told, Acts 8:26 (NIV) Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Philip didn't even know what he was to do or who he was to meet!

Well, Philip ends up meeting one man! Seriously? That's it? He leaves a successful ministry for that? Of course, what he didn't know beforehand is that this one man – an Ethiopian eunuch – would go ahead and impact an entire continent (Africa). Aren't we glad that Philip was willing to obey?

What human being could possibly think that they would be wise enough to know the best course for God's kingdom to take? Only an arrogant one! And how about Paul? He wanted to minister in the province of Asia and Bithynia – but the Spirit of Jesus said, "No." Really? Yes, really.

Once again we end up seeing tremendous divine wisdom in this step. Paul and his group obeyed and went down to Troas. During the night, Paul had a vision to go to Macedonia instead (Europe). And much fruit was borne there in the immediate and long-term! Oh the wisdom of God! However, for this wisdom we need to receive specific directions from the Spirit himself. And for that, we'll need to hear his voice in prayer.



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. In your own words, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.
2. Write down 2 or 3 examples of when God gave you specific direction in prayer. Spend some time thanking him for speaking to you in prayer.
3. Ask 1 or 2 other believers to share when they have followed God's specific direction in prayer. It is important that we rejoice with others! This can also serve to spur one another on for further prayer.
4. Do you feel like you're stuck on making a decision? If yes, write the decision down on a piece of paper and then put this paper somewhere where you will see it daily. Invite God to fill the paper up with his thoughts and direction.

DAY 9 - WHY FAST? FASTING STRENGTHENS US AS WE BATTLE

There are things in our lives that we KNOW are God's will (i.e. the salvation of loved ones; good marriages; revival of churches; freedom from bondages; etc.) And we also know that God promises to do many things for us. This is one of the reasons why we praise him! YET aren't we tempted to just sit back and wait for him to do it all?

But nothing happens! Things fall apart around us! We become disappointed, disillusioned or even angry with this God who appears to do nothing. But God never intended for us to let him do all the work. No! He has set up his kingdom to work in such a way that we have to cooperate with him. This is a partnership – right from Genesis on!

Here's a vital truth - God will NOT do our part and we CANNOT do his part. Some blessings he has chosen to give us only if his people rise up as partners in prayer and fasting. Further, when we're trying to battle for restoration in a poor marriage or a lost child, remember that there are demonic forces involved as well.

Satan has always been after those who belong to God and are attempting to thwart his plans. Remember the first family? Cain killed Abel. Since that point, there's been a war going on that we're called to engage in.

So, what are we to do? God's Word says, James 4:7 (NIV) Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Yes, there is a time to wait on God, but there is also a time to RESIST. And how can we resist? With God's divine weapons. Paul tells us, 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 (NIV) For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

We need to use divine weapons such as prayer, inner healing, deliverance, and confession. Then there are the gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy and words of knowledge. But what about fasting? Yes, fasting is also a weapon that God has given us!

In a previous lesson, we saw that when the disciples asked Jesus why they could not drive out the demons in a boy, he replied, Matthew 17:21 (NIV) But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting. But why does fasting work? Why has God set it up this way?

God's strategy is in part found in these words of Paul, 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 (NIV) But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

In our intellect (and sometimes pride!) we may think – I can battle when I’m strong. But there’s a problem with this! We then try to take the credit. Or people who feel less capable naturally conclude that they cannot resist the devil. Instead, God has set it up so that we win in our weakness. And does fasting make us feel weak? For sure!

May we increasingly have the attitude of Paul, 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV) ... my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. As one leader who works with the persecuted church around the world has said – they have much power for ministry because of both their poverty and their persecution. Both make them feel weak, so they rely on God!

Fasting then is effective because it’s voluntary weakness, rather than involuntary weakness. Can we embrace this way of the Master, Jesus? Can we accept that this can be something very useful in our lives? Did we know that Paul fasted OFTEN? (see 2 Corinthians 11:27) And did we know that fasting and humility are linked? We see this in the story of Ezra in the Bible. We read that, Ezra 8:21 (NIV) There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.

And praise God, when we humble ourselves in voluntary weakness by fasting, God pours into us the grace to conquer! Then we move from the natural into the supernatural life! 1 Peter 5:5 (NIV) God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. This, of course, is not intended for some kind of spiritual elite (there is NO such thing!), but for ALL believers. Again, praise God for giving us all we need!



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today’s reading.
2. What battles are you facing, where God’s will is not being done? Or do you know others who are facing a battle like this? Write down a description of what’s happening.
3. Wrestle with this question – are you willing to fast to fight this battle? Don’t be rash in your response. Write down your feelings about fasting, your concerns, any reluctance or even if you’re excited about the possibility. Invite God to speak to you about what you write.
4. Memorize 2 Corinthians 10:3-4.

DAY 10 - WHY FAST? FASTING TRAINS US TO RESIST TEMPTATION

Some people just can't get victory over certain sins: anger, bitterness, jealousy, addictions to alcohol, drugs, food, pornography, etc. Even some who have experienced deliverance and freedom slide back and lose the ground they just gained. This can be so discouraging! In fact, we've all faced this challenge before! It can be very frustrating.

Here we need to learn that we don't just WIN our freedom; we have to WALK it out. There is grace to dig out of a deep hole, but there's also the grace required to not fall back in. And one of the key ways to walk in freedom is through fasting.

Why can fasting be so effective? As humans we're three parts – spirit, soul, and body. When we give our lives to Jesus, our spirits are transformed by and submitted to the Holy Spirit. Praise God! Then we need to ensure that our souls (the mind, emotions, and will) are submitted to the Spirit's leading in our lives. Of course, when this happens, we then submit our bodies consistent with God's will. It's a beautiful thing when we do this!

Unfortunately, though our spirits are united with God's Spirit, our souls can be like little children whining, complaining and craving things that will harm us. Just as a child needs training, we need to participate in re-training our souls. For example, have you ever woken up in the morning and your emotions rage – "I don't want to engage with my day today" or "my life is too hard" or "I feel trapped and just want to escape?"

This is the brokenness of our soul speaking! And if we live out of that place, we'll have a bad day (and maybe the people around us too). Put another way, our soul gets its way and it's no more enjoyable than an unhappy toddler or teen who desires to get their way.

The way to overcome the soul, or flesh, when it's tempting us to go the wrong way is to yield to the work of the Spirit in our lives. And here's where fasting can be of great help! By fasting, we choose to not give in to all our desires, even good ones that are mixed in with harmful ones. That is, we start to train ourselves to be under the control of God's Spirit. As Paul said, Galatians 5:16 (ESV) But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. This encouragement and promise from Paul is very good news!

Is it true that when we first start fasting, the immature soul will whine and complain and demand relief? Yes! But here we must choose to let the Spirit take control. And if we do, the whining and complaining and demanding will begin to reduce. And this will have a HUGE ripple effect on all our areas where we need personal growth.

In fact, we'll move from a place where doing the wrong thing can seem automatic, to a beautiful newness where godly living and freedom become our habits. This is possible! This is what God's Word teaches. What an incredible motivation for fasting!



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.
2. What reason for fasting is given today? Explain it in your own words, as if you were explaining it to a newer believer.
3. What is an area of your life where doing the wrong thing seems easier or even automatic? Or where do you struggle to consistently live out God's commands – i.e. to forgive? Write this down.
4. In response to your answer in Question 3, ask God to help you grow in this area. Ask him to help you understand the connection between fasting and victory over temptation.
5. Review 2 Corinthians 10:3-4

DAY 11 - WHY FAST? FASTING TRAINS US TO RESIST TEMPTATION

Of course, if we continued a food fast to the extreme, eventually we would die. Not that this would happen quickly! But thinking about this is useful because it points to another reason for fasting. Fasting, in a symbolic way, communicates to God that we are prepared to lay down our lives for whatever breakthrough we're fasting for. And our Father responds to this kind of urgency!

Think of your own life. Are you moved by the urgency of others? Well, God's Word teaches us that God is no different. Some struggle to understand this concept, but will we let God's Word teach us beyond our understanding?

There are many examples in the Bible where an individual or group, in desperation, turned to fasting. The fasting demonstrated their determination. For example, when Israel was in an awful place – spiritually and nationally (plagues, enemies attacking) – they are told, Joel 2:12-15 (NIV) “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.”

Did God care about their situation? Of course! However, he was giving them a way to communicate if THEY cared. How desperate were they for restoration, for change? Fasting – among other things – would be their way of saying – “please God, do a MIGHTY work!”



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.
2. What reasons for fasting are given today? Explain them in your own words, as if you were explaining them to a newer believer.
3. Take one of your prayer requests and spend some time praying for it. Ask God to show you if there are any steps you can take, how to pray, spiritual warfare, etc.
4. Spend some time praying for one of the church's corporate prayer requests for the year.

DAY 12 - WHY FAST? FASTING GIVES US A HUNGER FOR JESUS, THE BREAD OF LIFE

Imagine coming home VERY hungry and you have one hour left before mealtime – guess where you'll likely go? The cupboard for snacks! And what if you really satisfy your hunger? What would happen when the person you live with serves you a wonderful meal sixty minutes later? You'll likely just sample the food, because you're already full!

In the same way, if our souls are satisfied by other things, we won't be hungry for God either. God warned the Israelites about this possibility, Deuteronomy 31:20 (NIV) When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the land I promised on oath to their forefathers, and when they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant.

This was a danger for God's people in the Old Testament and it's a danger for us now too! HOWEVER, when we fast, we make a decision that we'll not "snack" before the big meal – God himself! Some are uncomfortable with the idea of "feeding on God," yet it's completely biblical.

To illustrate this, God used the daily supply of manna for the Israelites. When they had exited Egypt, they were concerned – where will we get food? The next morning he supernaturally supplied them with manna! Their temporary food fast was over and it was also intended to teach them that what they ultimately needed was God! Or as Moses describes it, Deuteronomy 8:3 (NIV) He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

There's a huge lesson here! Natural things like food are meant to take care of our natural bodies, but the spiritual part of us is to be fed supernaturally by God himself. Do you have a "comfort food?" Something you turn to when stressed or feeling down? Most people do! Well, as we fast from actual food (or other things), we're reminded to feed on that which can comfort our soul!

As Psalm 23 notes, Psalms 23:1-3 (NIV) The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Who is the only one who can restore our soul? God! Consider another verse, which provides a fantastic promise, Psalm 63:5 (NIV) My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

Do you ever lack hope, joy, or peace? We all can get to this place! By fasting, we can learn that only God can fill us up again! Or as Paul declared, Romans 15:13 (NIV) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But there's more to this. IF we only feed on other things, not only will we not have a hunger or passion for God, but God can begin to withdraw his blessings from us. Why does God take a lack of hunger for him seriously?

Remember, Satan lifted himself up in heaven to be worshiped – and was cast out. In the wilderness he tempted Jesus, saying that he would give Jesus the kingdoms of this world if Jesus would bow down and worship him. If Satan tried to get Jesus to worship him, do you think he's trying to get US to worship him? YES!

Further, there's something revealing about Jesus' response to this temptation. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus said, Matthew 4:10 (NIV) 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" In other words, don't worship God AS WELL AS something else! We see often in the Old Testament that God judged Israel for their divided worship. For example, he sent King Shalmaneser of Assyria to capture part of Israel. And what was God's charge against his people? 2 Kings 17:41 (NIV) Even while these people were worshiping the LORD, they were serving their idols.

This is challenging! It's not just saying we should serve God; we're told we can't worship God AND something or someone else! And such idolatry is also called adultery in the Bible. We're cheating on God! One prophet says, Ezekiel 23:37 (NIV) They committed adultery with their idols ...

Money, power, sex, food, pleasure, movies, sports, TV, music, position, can all be gods in our lives – and this is very dangerous! So what do we do then? First, we can search our hearts for such idols, in prayer. As David prayed, Psalm 139:23-24 (NIV) Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me.

Second, we should repent (turn) from our idols. As God said to Israel, Jeremiah 3:14 (NIV) Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. Third, we can fast. Fasting will tear our attachment to idols away from us. Can it be painful? Yes! But is it worth it? For sure! It will help us both honor God and feed on the true Bread of Life, Jesus!



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.
2. What reasons for fasting are given today? Explain them in your own words, as if you were explaining them to a newer believer.
3. Is there something that is an idol in your life, that is keeping you from feeding on the true Bread of Life? Do not take this question lightly. The standard is whether we love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. You may even have to lay down the opinion or low standards of others – as even others can become our "gods."
4. Is there someone whom you can encourage with what God has shown you today?

DAY 13 - WHY FAST? TO EXPRESS A DESIRE FOR JESUS' RETURN

Anna, a prophetess, was widowed seven years after marriage and lived until she was eighty-four. We're told in the book of Luke that she never left the temple, she worshipped the Lord night and day and she fasted and prayed. This is quite a commitment! Our lives may not look exactly like hers, but we can learn from her.

But what was she praying and fasting for? When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, she gave thanks to God and spoke to everyone about the child. This was great news for all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem! It is clear that she was praying and fasting for the 1st coming of Jesus and his incredible work! And since his 1st coming didn't fulfill everything that God has promised, she was directly and indirectly praying and fasting for his 2nd coming.

Did you know that every believer is supposed to long for the return of Jesus? Put another way, we should groan for the "more" that is still to come. Well, fasting of different types can help us shed our attachment to this world and create a desire for the complete fulfillment of all of God's promises. Jesus asked, Luke 18:8 (NIV) ... when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? How do we ensure that we have this faith? Again, fasting helps.

Then consider this encounter that Jesus had with those who were trying to follow God, Matthew 9:14-15 (NIV) Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast." Jesus is emphasizing that there's a time to fast and a time to not fast. Well, the bridegroom (Jesus) has been taken from us! It's time to fast as we long for his return.

In fact, fasting and desiring the return of Jesus work like a cycle. As we fast, the desire increases. And as the desire increases, we fast for his return. Many people in our largely prosperous world don't like unfulfilled desires or longings. But here we do well to learn from Paul, who declared, Romans 8:22-23 (NIV) For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons.

Do you ever groan? Do you ever mourn? Do you truly desire the return of Jesus? All of these "holy habits" can be encouraged by fasting. In Prayer & Fasting 8, we'll balance this out with some important principles. However, may we not lose sight of the teaching of Jesus, that, Matthew 5:4 (NIV) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Sometimes we're to seek discomfort NOW for greater purposes LATER. Sometimes we have to set aside our pleasures to meditate on vital challenges such as, Luke 21:34 (NIV) Be careful, or your hearts will be weighted down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.

hunger or passion for God, but God can begin to withdraw his blessings from us. Why does God take a lack of hunger for him seriously?

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REFLECTION AND PRAYER

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2. What reason for fasting is given today? Explain it in your own words, as if you were explaining it to a newer believer.
3. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your desire for the return of Jesus? After answering, how does this compare with 1 year ago, 5 years ago and 10 years ago?
4. Spend some time praising Jesus for his 1st coming and his promised 2nd coming. If you need something to help you in your praise, spend some time looking at Revelation 21. The Bible can really help us praise, pray and fast!
5. Do you know someone who obviously longs for the return for Jesus? Contact them and ask them how they keep that "fire burning."

DAY 14 - WHY FAST? TO BE SET APART AND EMPOWERED FOR GOD'S WORK

Many don't realize that what Jesus did was because of the Spirit's power. The New Testament emphasizes this over and over again. For example, the book of Acts tells us, Acts 10:38 (NIV) ... how God anointed Jesus of Nazereth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

Just as Jesus ministered by the power of the Spirit, so must we. We cannot truly do God's work without this help! This is why when Jesus launched the new movement of the kingdom of God, through the church, he sent his Spirit! Can we accept that this is God's way for us to do his work? Hopefully we can!

It's also fascinating that one of the ways that Jesus was prepared to minister in the power of the Spirit was to fast. In fact, it was after his forty day fast that we read, Luke 4:14 (NIV) Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. His effectiveness wasn't accidental! It was the power of the Spirit, AFTER a period of fasting.

The early church understood that they needed to imitate the fasting of Jesus – not necessarily for forty days, but consistently. They faced many challenges with fasting. For example, Acts also reports, Acts 13:2 (NIV) 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.

Let's be honest here. In our pride, we may say – "I can do the work of God without fasting." But here's the question – why does the author of the Bible, God himself, continue to note that Jesus, the early church and Old Testament saints fasted? If all Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, is there not something that we miss or rebel against if we refuse to fast?

Yes, fasting is hard! But it's not an overstatement to say we should not avoid it. Even the simple words of Jesus should be enough for us, Matthew 6:17 (NIV) But WHEN you fast ...



REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. In your own journal, write down something that stood out to you from today's reading.
2. What reason for fasting is given today? Explain it in your own words, as if you were explaining it to a newer believer.
3. Would you describe yourself as someone who regularly demonstrates both the fruit and power of God's Spirit? (see Galatians 5:22-23, Acts 1:8). Would others describe your life this way?
4. If you've refused to fast, even though it's a pattern taught in the Bible, spend some time in confession.
5. 5. Ask God to speak to you about your responses in Questions 3 & 4. Don't be surprised if he affirms and encourages you, even if you've been avoiding fasting or struggling with it! He is "gentle and humble of heart" even as he calls us to carry the burdens he gives us.



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