

The Practice of Biblical Fasting

Biblical Fasting

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The text for our message this morning comes from Matthew 6, beginning in verse 16, and I invite you to turn there with me. We really went through this text last week. There's some lingering critical issues that I want to pick up here today. Matthew 6, beginning in verse 16. We'll let the Lord have the first say as we begin our time together here. He says in verse 16,

16 Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

And there is that interesting phrase right at the end of verse 18, "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you," which reminds us that God is favorably disposed toward his children; that God is a God who blesses us; that God is a God of grace and kindness and mercy; and a God who cares for us, and I think that it is so vital for us to remember that as we consider the whole matter of fasting. So often when fasting is taught, it is taught in a way that gives you the impression that God is reluctant; that God is hiding; and that you need to work hard and do things in order to get his attention so that he will bless you. Well, friends, let's step back from everything and just remember exactly what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is and what the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us about God and about our Lord Jesus.

The very word "Gospel" is "good news," is the meaning of the term. It's the good news of what God has done for ruined sinners like you and me in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ voluntarily left the glories of heaven in order to come to earth; that he is God Incarnate; he was born of a virgin; and during his earthly life, he lived in perfect obedience to the law of God, something that none of us have ever come close to. He went about conducting miracles, conducting ministry, teaching, all verifying, all vindicating his claim to be the eternal Son of God, but sinful men rejected him. Sinful men crucified him. And in the eternal plan of God, as he suffered on the cross, Jesus Christ took the sin of men on his shoulders, endured the wrath of God and died in the place of sinners like you. On the third day, God raised him

from the dead and in that resurrection, declared that he accepted the death of Christ as the sacrifice for sinners, as the payment for their sins, and in the resurrection, the statement is made universally, proclaimed to all who would hear that Jesus Christ on the cross satisfied all the demands of God's justice because the penalty of sin is death. Christ paid that penalty and rose on the other side. Death had no further claim on him.

Now Christ has ascended to heaven where he sits at the right hand of God representing his people so that they would have free access to God, and the Gospel declares that all who would repent of sin and believe in Christ would have forgiveness of sin, would be saved, and would receive the gift of eternal life. The Gospel tells us that God is a merciful and forgiving God who will declare sinners righteous who put their faith in Christ and give them eternal life so that they may live in heaven forever and ever. That's who Christ is. That's who God is. That's what the Gospel is. That's the good news. That's the best news of all. That's the only news that matters and it would do me well to ask you here this morning whether you have believed in Christ for your salvation or not because this is the only hope of salvation, this is the only hope of the forgiveness of your sins, and yet it is the message that assures us that God, for those of us that have received Christ, that God is favorably disposed toward us; that God's eternal plan of redemption has been accomplished in our lives and that we have the assurance that he loves us. We have the assurance that he cares of us. We have the assurance that he will keep us. That's who God is and that is a cause for joy and that is a cause for rejoicing and the understanding of the Gospel and the knowledge that we belong to him and we are secure in Christ, changes our whole outlook on everything. Nehemiah says that the joy of the Lord is your strength.

So we open with that and we realize that there are fundamental truths that accompany those of us who have believed in Christ. Fundamental truths that define the entire way that you look at life. Christ is with us, Matthew 28:20. Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, Galatians 2:20. Christ is in you, the hope of glory, Colossians 1:28. And when we're burdened, when we're heavy-hearted, Jesus said he's gentle and humble in heart and gives rest to our souls, Matthew 11:28-29. And in the fullness of the glory of the Gospel, in this great redemptive plan established by God before the beginning of time, certain to be carried out to perfection without fail throughout all of eternity future and in the midst of the blessings that we have here that we've been remembering and recalling, we have the promise of Christ that he will never leave us nor forsake us. Christian, let me say that in the second person, that's in Hebrews 13:5 for those of you that are trying to place that in your biblical Rolodex, so to speak. He'll never leave us or forsake us and so we realize that the doors of heaven have opened on us and the blessing of a good and a great God have been showered upon us, not in drizzle, not in little tiny raindrops, oceans of blessing have been dropped upon us in Christ, a gift that we did not seek on our own because none seek for God, Romans 3 tells us, but this was God seeking us. This was Christ seeking us in order to bless us, in order to be good to us, in order to keep us.

Now friend, if you're a Christian at all here this morning, I know that that encourages your heart. I know that that refreshes your mind in Christ and that even in the midst of the difficulties that you and I brought into the room here today, we're reminded of a perspective that, "Oh yes, this is why we sing his praises! Oh yes, this is why we say

praise the Lord, ye heavens adore him! Because we adore him too and we love him for all that he's done for us, and we realize that in Christ we have every blessing of God, we have righteousness, redemption and sanctification, and we have just been blessed beyond anything that our minds could ever begin to fully comprehend. So we love him and we praise him for that."

Now, I think that it is just absolutely essential for us in this New Testament age to keep that in mind as we consider the teaching of Jesus on fasting and to keep in mind what it is that we're trying to accomplish. In between last Sunday and this Sunday, I had opportunity to see some different fasting programs that churches are promoting even as we speak here today, and page after page of regulations and what you do on the first day and the second day and the third day, and you can eat this and not this, you can have these kinds of juices and not those kinds of juices. Don't give up ground to Satan by breaking your fast prematurely. And you read that, you read that and your shoulders just start to sag under the weight of what's being placed upon you and threats implied and explicit saying that if you break the fast you're going to be giving back ground to Satan. Say what? Are you speaking to me as a Christian? Excuse me, but Christ has already conquered Satan and Christ has already brought me out of his domain and delivered me into the kingdom of his beloved Son. Why are you laying these rules and regulations down on my mind and upon my conscience when the Gospel tells me something completely different? When the Gospel tells me something rich about his forgiveness and his love?

And yet I understand and, look, I'm up here today to protect you and to help you, my brother and sister in Christ, to think through these things lest you ever be sucked into that mindset and have that laid upon you. When you get to the end of a 21 day fasting regime outlined for you and the closing message is about all of the bodily reactions and difficulties you're going to be facing at the end of the fast, it ought to occur to your mind, it should occur to your biblical mind that something is greatly amiss here if I'm being led into discussions about bodily reactions when Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ is raised again, Christ has ascended into heaven. Something is horribly wrong with that and yet you can sprinkle it with enough Old Testament and Gospel allusions that it somehow sounds plausible.

Well, we need to have a perspective on all of these things. The title of today's message is "The Practice of Biblical Fasting." It presupposes everything that I said last week which really exegeted the text and so I encourage you to pick up that message if you haven't heard it. And here's what I want to remind you of here this morning is simply this: is that in the Old Testament and even in the four Gospel accounts, you could say, the Bible shows us that fasting is expressing spiritual urgency in dire circumstances, that there is a heaviness of heart that accompanies true fasting in a seeking of God and that is what we looked at last time. So we have this pattern of fasting, we have Jesus' teaching here which, as we showed, actually diminishes fasting compared to prayer. He expands his teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 at great length. Fasting, he doesn't do that at all. We realize that kind of like an accordion, we're seeing something expanded and something contracted. That should have an effect on the way that we think about it and the question

is: what perspective do we here in the 21st century as biblical Christians, what perspective do we take on fasting here today? Well, I want to give you two things. First of all, fasting in the New Testament and, secondly, food in the New Testament, and this is all going to seem so basic and yet it's the basic things, beloved, that I've found that are most able to protect you from being led astray and I don't want you to be led astray.

So let's consider first fasting in the New Testament, always keeping in mind the glory of the Gospel that we opened with, the favor of God that has been bestowed upon us. Let's keep that in mind as we go into this. Well, here we go. Jesus' teaching on prayer paralleled his teaching on fasting.

Look for example, if you would, at verse 6. Go to verse 5, he says,

5 When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

He whistles to us, as it were. He whistles and says, "Hey, come over here." I would do the whistle but I can't whistle so you just imagine that I whistled really loud with my fingers in my mouth. I can't do that but imagine that I did. All of the show, all of the show of religion, all of the show of prayer that existed in the first century and man hasn't changed, it perpetuates into today. Jesus whistles to us, as it were, and says, "My beloved disciple, you come over here and be different. You be of another mindset. Not praying so as to call attention to yourself. Come over here quietly in secret where your loving gracious Father will certainly see you. Pray to him in that context, in that realm, and know that your Father sees and will reward you."

Well, in the same way when it comes to fasting, look at verse 16. He's teaching the same principle against hypocrisy and he says in verse 16, "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting." Do you see it again? It's all just a show and, beloved, nothing has changed in the intervening 2,000 years. When churches and everything just put on this great big emphasis on fasting, it's just a show. It is not the reality as you're going to see and you need to be protected in your mindset against that. It's all just a show. "Let's be noticed by men for our fasting." I detest it because it is so contrary to what our Lord teaches us and it teaches us to think wrongly about God, as if God is somehow reluctant to give his blessing to us; as if somehow there are extra things that we need to do to get into the inner core of his blessing. Out on the thought! Out on the detestable damnable thought that there is something that we could do to add to the work of Christ that would make God more favorably disposed to us. That's all fundamentally wrong thinking. It is in Christ that we have our access to God. It is in Christ that our blessing has been given. And it is in Christ that we have our perfect

access. Colossians says in him you have been made complete and that's freedom. That's glorious. That's a knowledge that God loves us and keeps us.

Now, going on here. Jesus, as I said, Matthew 6:9-15, he expands on his teaching on prayer after he gives that warning against hypocrisy. In verses 16 to 18, he doesn't expand on fasting. The contrast should make us say, "Okay, he's emphasized prayer, he's de-emphasizing fasting." They're not on the same plane here because he does not tell us, "Fast in this way," and then gives us all kinds of regulations. You go to any fasting program, anybody that's teaching on fasting for the most part that's trying to advocate and get you to do so many days of fasting, they tell you, "Fast in this way." Your immediate thought should be, "But wait a minute, Jesus did not say that. Jesus had full opportunity to say, 'Fast in this way. Eat peanut and drink juice.' He didn't do it." If he knew that we needed instruction in prayer, if this was necessary for fasting, he would have told us. He's not withholding what we need. He's given us everything that we need in his blessed word. So when you start to see the rules and regulations coming down, you just say, "I'm out of here. I don't need this. In Christ I have a perfect access that is sufficient."

Now I'm going to show you more of why I say that but it is significant that Jesus does not say, "Fast in this way." He did not regulate fasting like he did in prayer. Now you can say that in verse 16 he says, "Whenever you fast," that he's assuming that we would fast. Matthew 9, he seems to assume that we're going to fast when he said, "After the bridegroom is taken away, after that they'll fast," but he never regulates it like that. He did not institute fasts for us to observe. That de-emphasis is something that we should pay very close attention to.

Now beloved, I want you to stay with me here. I really want you to stay with me because this is all for your blessing and your confidence in Christ. This is for your up-building here as we go through this. In the past we have taught about the importance of recognizing the progress of revelation. The Old Testament was the beginning of God's revelation. Jesus came to earth, fulfilled the law with his life and with his death. And then we find in the book of Acts and we find in the epistles the apostolic interpretation of the life of Christ. We are not meant to simply willy-nilly take everything that we read about in the Old Testament and New Testament and immediately do it ourselves. There is a reason that we don't sacrifice goats and bulls, it's because in the progress of revelation, Christ is the final sacrifice. So the fact that you read about someone doing something in the Old Testament or even in the Gospel accounts, doesn't mean that that's something that you are supposed to mimic yourself.

Think about it. This is fundamentally critical for your spiritual life. Think about it. If you had the mindset that whatever Christ did, I am also supposed to do, what would you be doing except consigning yourself and condemning yourself to have to suffer on a cross? Christ died on a cross. Is that what you're supposed to do? You know instinctively, "No, that's not the point. Christ did that so I wouldn't have to." The point being that as revelation unfolds, things change and not everything that you read about is meant to be something for you to do. Sometimes the Bible is simply describing what happened and you interpret it in light of subsequent revelation.

If you follow with me in a couple of passages, you'll see what I mean. Go back to Matthew 4 and in verse 1, last time we saw the Old Testament fasts, we addressed that sufficiently, in my opinion. Matthew 4:1, remember, Jesus is on the front side of the cross here and on the front side of the cross, on the front side of his ministry, chapter 4, verse 1,

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

Jesus opening his ministry was led by the Spirit and there was this time of fasting that accompanied it.

If you go to the book of Acts 9, you'll find that the Apostle Paul went without food for three days after he met the Lord on the road to Damascus. Acts 9:8. The details of these narratives is not as important as the point that I'm going to make in just a moment so stay with me, please. Acts 9:8,

8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

One more in the book of Acts. We find the early church fasting as they chose leaders and sent them out. Acts 13:2,

2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Revelation not yet complete there. The Holy Spirit speaking to them directly in the development of the early church.

And one more in Acts 14:23.

23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Now, beloved, stay with me. I've said that 3 or 4 times. You're staying with me and I'm very grateful for that. You might think if you were reading casually and not thinking too seriously about what you were seeing, you might think that those examples from the life of Jesus and from the life of the early church were requirements for you to fast regularly, and there are teachers who would say that, "See the early church? See Jesus? Therefore you should fast and here's the rules that I have for you to do it in." But beloved, these are

all narrative passages which means these are stories which tell us what happened. They are describing what happened. They are not telling us or commanding us what to do, they are simply describing what happened in the past.

Now, when you combine that with what I am about to say, I think you'll see the point. As you continue reading in the New Testament, as you read through the rest of the book of Acts, as you start to read the New Testament epistles with fasting in mind, you'll notice something very crucial. As you continue in the New Testament, fasting fades away. Prayer doesn't. There is a lot of instruction, biblical instruction and biblical patterns of prayer in Paul's epistles and in James and in all of the New Testament epistles. Lots on prayer but do you know that the New Testament epistles do not even use the verb for fasting even though there is abundant teaching on the topic of prayer? That has to mean something. Remember the progress of revelation and you see something just kind of fading into the shadows, fading into the dark of night, as it were, and coming into a cloak of divine obscurity which is directly opposite to the discipline of prayer. Something has changed as we look at fasting in the New Testament. Something has changed. There is a silence on this that resonates with us.

With that said, having looked briefly at fasting in the New Testament, let me bring to your mind food in the New Testament. Food in the New Testament. There is kind of a negative and a positive argument here that we're making and we'll draw out conclusions in the end. Food in the New Testament and what does the New Testament say about food? You know, I mean, fasting is all about food, right? You're just not eating it but it's about food. It's about something external to your body. What does the New Testament have to say about that? The New Testament teaches us not to make food a central issue in your Christian life.

Look at the book of Colossians 2. And I have to tell you, I feel a lot of compassion, I feel a lot of sympathy for people that have been sucked into these fasting programs and regimens that just make them miserable because the New Testament would free them from all of that nonsense and they could get on with enjoying life. Colossians 2:16, the Apostle Paul says,

16 Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- 17 things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Beloved, what had I just been saying to you? And I speak with a measure of urgency because I just want you to grasp and understand, not because I'm upset. I'm not upset with any of you. Look at the Gospel. See the glory of Christ. See the substance of Christ presented to you in the Gospel with which we opened. The fullness of God revealed in Christ and he belongs to you. He loves you. He's in you. He's saved you. He keeps you. He's going to bring you into heaven. That's the substance of the Gospel, food is incidental. The food regulations in the Old Testament were an utter shadow pointing to a much greater reality. Well, beloved, now that we have the greater reality in Christ, the shadows go away. Christ said, I'm being metaphorical here, Christ is the light of the

world. Christ has brought his light to bear on your life and that means that the shadows are gone. What happens to a shadow when light shines? It goes away. Christ is the light of the world. Christ is your light. The shadows are gone.

Continue on with verse 20, chapter 2, verse 20 in Colossians. Paul says,

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)--in accordance with [watch it] the commandments and teachings of men?

Paul says, "If you have Christ why are you submitting yourself to burdens that men are laying upon you? Don't you see that Christ has taken care of it all on your behalf?" Then he goes on and he says in verse 23,

23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Do you know what? Avoiding food cannot deal with the hate and the sin and the lust in your own heart. That's a work of the Spirit and food or the absence of food isn't going to help you with that. Paul says it's of no value in fighting against sin. Our fight against sin is won in the spirit, not in the fast. So Paul says, "Do not submit yourselves to such teaching that regulates your approach to food. Severe discipline does not advance your sanctification." Church history would teach people that, for crying out loud. Oh, beloved.

Look over at 1 Corinthians 8. In a slightly different context, the Apostle Paul says in verse 8. 1 Corinthians 8:8,

8 But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

Paul says this is a matter of indifference. It's not about food.

In 1 Timothy 4:3, I can read it to you. 1 Timothy 4:3, Paul says, and I'll start in verse 1. We've looked at it already last week.

1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, 3 men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.

Do you know what you should do when you've got a good meal sitting in front of you? You should say, "This is a gift from God. How good of God to bless me like this. Lord, thank you for this food." And then you should share in it and enjoy it because that's what God has given you to do. He's a gracious giving God. Why do we think, where do we think that we can improve on what Christ has done for us by abstaining from food?

Romans 14:17 says,

17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Right? When you consider the topic of food in the New Testament, there's more we could say but when it comes to thinking that food can advance your spiritual life, can improve your sanctification, the New Testament says, "No, no, no." When it comes to men who say, "You must do this and that. You've got to fast just this way." Well, Paul says, "Don't submit yourself to people who say that." In fact, he calls this preoccupation with food and fasting doctrines of demons. So there is no way that this is meant to be a preoccupation with us as we're walking the Christian life here in the completion of the New Testament.

So where does that leave us as a New Testament believer, then? Where does that leave us with fasting? Well, let's go back and just remember what we learned from the Old Testament. Fasting in the Old Testament was set for times of distress. There were life circumstances, there were threats of extermination, there were extraordinary circumstances that was bring this fasting to bear upon the lives of those. We considered David and the Jews in Esther, and one other one which escapes my mind in the weakness of the moment. But we saw it tied to extraordinary circumstances, grieving circumstances of that.

Now, what about you as a New Testament believer? Well, I would say this. There are a couple of things that I want you to see here about this. First of all, I've said all along if you don't want to fast, don't fast, but if you're in grievous circumstances where food is just an appalling thought to you because of the preoccupation of your mind of different things that are going on and you want to fast, God bless you. It's not my place to tell you not to fast under those circumstances but for you to recognize that fasting – stay with me, it's so important, stay with me – to realize that your body is responding to extraordinary circumstances and you go with the flow of that, but not to set up fasting as it's something that you do in some kind of intervals like it's some kind of entertainment. Listen to what the 19th century Baptist commentator, John Broadus, said. He said, "Fasting is right only when your condition makes it natural. In a time of joy, fasting would be unnatural and could not express a genuine feeling, but persons who are in great distress are naturally inclined to abstain from eating. Fasting can deepen those spiritual impulses toward worship and devout meditation."

So you're under a great stress of life some of you here today, and you say, "You know, I'm not going to eat. I'm just going to particularly seek the Lord in this time." To which I say, "God bless you." It's not my place to tell you not to do that if that's expressing the

genuine, deep, profound, you need help from God that goes beyond normal circumstances and you want to fast because it's a time of great distress in your life. Go for it. But you don't need me or any other teacher to give you a list of do's and don'ts as you do it. Just go with the natural impulse that accompanies the spiritual distress of your soul and trust the Lord to help you in the midst of it. If you're joyful, if life is good for you right now, you know, you like your job, you like what you're doing, your family relationships are harmonious, beloved, there is no way that fasting has any meaning to you at that point. You're just doing it to do it because it's not a reflection of the whole biblical purpose of fasting which is this is reserved for times of distress.

I'm just trying to help. I am just trying to help your spiritual life. That's all I'm trying to do. Don't make up, don't pretend to be in distress when you're not because, beloved, trust me, those of you that are young enough and life hasn't hit you with its waves, there will be times where the distress will come and it will come natural to you. Save it for then. Don't pretend that something is like it is when it's not, when it's not real in your life. So if you're joyful, don't adopt an artificial position of mourning. Don't do that. If you are joyful and you are conscious that God has blessed you, you should not start fasting. You should renew your gratitude and thanks to God in private. "God, thank you for how good my life is. I can't believe that you gave me the family and the spouse that you gave me. I'm doing what I want to do in life. Oh, there is some trouble, sure, but Lord, I look around and all around it's just blessing after blessing. God, I'm so thankful." That is far more pleasing to God that you would recognize his blessings and thank him for it as the one who gave them to you, rather than to pretend that you're in a bad situation that you're not.

Having said all of that and we're going to finish early today. That's alright. Having said all of that, beloved, I want to take you back to where we started, take you back to the Gospel. Those of you that are in that distress and, you know, it even takes away your desire for the normal things of life and eating, beloved, will you hear me as I say this? Ultimately the answer to your mourning and the answer to your distress is ultimately not going to be fasting. The ultimate answer to your broken heart is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is remembering that Christ came and died and buried and rose again and that if you are in Christ, you are united with him in his death, burial and resurrection. Everything about Christ proclaims triumph, proclaims victory, proclaims a joyful release to captives, proclaims forgiveness to sinners, proclaims hope in the hopeless situations. The answer to the grief of your heart, beloved, is remembering what we started out with. Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," Matthew 28:20. That's joyful. That helps. The answer to your sorrow is that Christ is in you, Christian. Brother and sister in Christ, don't you remember? Have you forgotten the indwelling Holy Spirit? Have you forgotten that God has put his Spirit in you as a down payment, as a promise that he's going to keep you to the end? Have you forgotten that? Christ in you, the hope of glory. Have you forgotten? Have you forgotten what Paul said, "Christ loved me and gave himself up for me." Oh, the riches that I have in Christ, the eternal Son of God, knew me by name when he died on the cross. He knew me by name in his electing purposes before the foundation of the world. He knows me by name now. He loves me. I see the cross. I see his spilled blood, metaphorically speaking. I see that he loves me.

That's joyful. That's the answer. That's the hope. That's the light that you're looking for. That's what revolutionizes and overturns the earthly perspective that's causing your grief and distress is remembering who Christ is. And this Christ who has done so much has said, "I will never ever ever leave you nor will I ever ever forsake you." It's a triple negative in the Greek, Hebrews 13. Emphasis. Emphasis. Emphasis. "I will not do that. I will not forsake you."

And so, beloved, would you find relief for your heavy heart? Fasting might play a part in that for you somewhere along the line but somewhere in our minds, somewhere in the corner of our perspective on life needs to be this fundamental defining perspective: Christ is with me, where is there room for hopelessness? Christ is with me, this is a joyful thing! This is what gives me the ability to triumph through my trials. Oh, beloved, fasting in a sense, is an expression of discontentment, right? Sorrow. Heaviness. All of that. And yet when Paul was buffeted by a messenger of Satan himself, how did Paul respond? You see, Scriptures point us not to fasting as the relief but to this incredible grace that's been bestowed upon us in Christ.

Do turn to 2 Corinthians 12:7. Paul under the weight of satanic assault in whatever form it was coming to him and in verse 7,

7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

The Lord speaks to Paul and says, "I see you in your weakness and I am content to leave you there," because his power is perfected in our weakness. If you had no need for his power, there would be no display of his glory. "I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, "Fast more, young man, and come back to me in 21 days." That's not what it says. There is not this interlude of external regulation of the body. Christ says to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." What is your weakness doing? Is it supposed to drive you to fasting? Not really. It's supposed to drive you to grace. It's supposed to drive you to Christ. It's supposed to drive you to the Gospel and all of the glorious things that we've been saying here today.

And where does that leave your heart? Where does that leave your heart? Paul says in verse 9,

Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

In his distress under satanic assault, under the heaviness of wrestling with principalities that operate in the heavenly places, even if that's where you're at and what you're wrestling and fighting with today, fighting with the devil himself, not that you would know that, follow the pattern of Paul, follow the completion of the New Testament revelation and realize that what this is doing is intended to point you to Christ and that the answer to the sorrow is the joy of belonging to him, the joy of the Gospel, the joy of his sufficiency.

I'll say this without fear of contradiction. I'll say this and gladly give account before the Lord for what I'm about to say. My friend, my brother, my dear brother and sister in Christ, 21 minutes of serious contemplation of the truth of the Gospel and of your position in Christ will do you far more spiritual good than 21 days of fasting apart from that. Twenty-one days of self-denial, 21 minutes of reflection on Christ. His grace is sufficient for you. His power is perfected in the weakness that drives you to lose your appetite and what was true of Paul is intended to be true of each one of us, that in our weakness we find our strength; that in our weakness without the circumstances changing, we find, "I can be content here." Why? "Because the grace of my God is sufficient and his power is perfected in my weakness."

So beloved, if you want to fast, fast, but before you do, recall all that is yours in Christ and maybe, just maybe, the force of the wonder of Christ will drive out the sorrow of heart and replace it with joy and thanksgiving that gives you the strength to go through the trial that the Lord has appointed for you in this time in your life. God bless you.

Let's pray.

Father, we take a moment just to quiet our hearts before you. We understand that there are many deep sorrows in the room here this morning, those watching over the live stream. Chronic ongoing issues that just seem to have no resolution. More recent challenges that have exploded on the scene and left us a little disoriented, maybe. God, if you do nothing else today, bring to each of our minds clarity of the Gospel, the clarity of the love of God that has been shed abroad in our hearts in the knowledge of Christ. We don't need to prompt you to remember us, Lord, because you never forgot in the first place. Lord, we don't need to prompt you to action as if slicing our body could somehow motivate you. Father, you've already taken action. You've already done it all in the Lord Jesus Christ and you bid us to come not to a table of fasting, but to Christ himself who said, "I will give rest for your souls, you who are weary and heavy laden." And so, Father, we realize that in Christ we have something that changes our whole perspective on fasting and the need for it. We have in Christ our all. We have in Christ the one who has done and it is finished. And I pray for my brothers and sisters in Christ that are here today, Father, that this remembrance and acknowledgment of Christ here this morning through his word would refresh, strength, comfort, perfect and establish them as they go through this day and, Father, that you would turn our mourning to joy, our sorrow to gladness in light of the transcendent realities that the Gospel brings home to our hearts. Bless each one and apply it to each heart and keep them and bless them and cause your face to shine upon them. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.