



21 PRAYER
AND
FASTING
DAYS

CLEARPOINT CHURCH



JANUARY 7-27, 2024

Dear Partners,


In January 2011, Clearpoint Church embarked on a *21-Day Prayer and Fasting Journey* that profoundly changed our lives. We have continued to make corporate prayer and fasting a regular practice at the beginning of each year. We invite you to come along with us in January 2024, as we seek the Lord together through prayer, fasting, and personal devotion to Him.

Participating in the *21-Day Prayer and Fasting Journey* is a great way to reset your spiritual compass and experience a fresh and new commitment to God in every area of your life. To prepare and inform you for the fast, this guide will answer many questions about fasting and provides a 21-Day Calendar to follow for each day. The 21 Days begins Sunday, January 7th. We break the fast, Sunday, January 28th.

I believe a 21-Day commitment to Fasting and Prayer will provide a whole new experience for you in your walk with Christ and His Body.

May God continue to bless you and us as you seek Him!

In This Together!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian Lambert". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and "L".

Brian Lambert
Lead Pastor

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MY FASTING NOTES

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ALL ABOUT FASTING

As we begin this *21-Day Prayer and Fasting Journey* together, there are a few questions we must answer in order to understand fasting and why it is essential to our walk with God. These answers will also encourage us all to continue faithfully to the finish line....Day 21!

QUESTION #1: WHAT IS FASTING? (WE DO THE DANIEL FAST. *We recommend the following websites for more information: Daniel-fast.com; ultimatedanielfast.com)*

Fasting is setting aside a specific amount of time to go without food in order to pray. The purpose is not to starve yourself and the goal is not to lose weight. It is an intentional time of pursuing God to fill a spiritual hunger rather than eating food to fill a physical hunger. It is denying your physical desire for food in order to pray and connect with God to meet a spiritual need. It might not make a lot of sense, but it is a powerful! Jesus never commanded it, but it was certainly expected that His followers would fast and pray.

Matthew 6:16-18 says, “when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (ESV)”

QUESTION #2: WHAT DOES FASTING DO?

1. Fasting expresses our hunger for God

- We express to God “food is good, but you are better.”
- It helps restore our focus from ourselves and the good things God places in our lives to the giver of those good things.
- God remains greater than anything and everything else in our lives.

2. Fasting makes our hearts tender toward God and helps us find our “satisfaction” in Him

- John Piper once said: “God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in Him.”
- The discipline of fasting is something that can bring us to that place of satisfaction.

3. Fasting exposes the heart

- Richard Foster says: “More than any other thing, fasting reveals the things that control us.”
- It reveals what is really inside.
- It can reveal to us the things that are holding us back.
- It can expose the one thing that is reinforcing that barrier between us and God.

Fasting can be extremely overwhelming. What can I eat? What can I not eat? Can I have this? Can I have that? These are questions that bombard our minds when we break from our normal eating routine. The struggle is ok. In fact, it’s good as long as our motivation for staying true to the fast isn’t rooted in guilt!

WHAT FASTING DOES NOT DO

- 1. Fasting does not motivate God to love you any more than He already does.**
 - God says in I Peter 2:9 that we are chosen by Him and are already His treasured possession! He already loves you as much as He possibly can!
- 2. Fasting does not make God enjoy you any more or any less.**
 - God already enjoys you. In fact, He delights in you! In Zephaniah 3:17 God says that He already exalts over us with shouts of joy!
- 3. Fasting does not put you on a “fast track” plan to a righteousness and holiness.**
 - God has already made us righteous, holy, and blameless through Christ’s finished work on the Cross.
 - We don’t fast to get more of God, but that we would experience, in a more profound way, the reality of God’s presence in our lives.
- 4. Fasting is not a trade-off with God for His forgiveness.**
 - We fast because He has already forgiven us! The Apostle Paul said our sins are forgiven by the blood of Christ! (Ephesians 1:7)
- 5. Fasting is not a replacement for obedience.**
 - Some people fast as penance believing their fasting will somehow balance out their disobedience. But our relationship with God is not based on law, it’s based on grace....not of works, lest we become boastful and prideful and rob God of His glory. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Sometimes, when we are not walking intimately with God, the inward reality of our faith begins to fade, and we retreat to the outward forms of the faith like fasting. It never works! The bottom line is that whenever we embrace a spiritual discipline in order to get God to love us, to find satisfaction in us, or to forgive us, we have completely missed the point! As you fast, set yourself free! Don’t fast under the belief that God is going to develop a greater approval of you because of your sacrifice. Fast in freedom, with a holy desire to give more of yourself to God!

PRAYER

As you prepare for the next 21 days, it can be tempting to start thinking of a laundry list of prayers you would love to see answered. Fight that temptation and keep this simple. Think about two or three things most pressing on your heart and zone in on those with God. Write these down in the space provided below and be open to hearing what God wants to show you in those areas. The breakthroughs, miracles and answers to your prayers will be by-products of drawing closer to Jesus.

When praying, make your primary goal to know Jesus and experience His presence deeper than ever before. Pray prayers of total surrender and aim to glorify God with your life. Focus first on what is right about Him, such as His goodness and His greatness. Determine to see everything else through that filter. And, make time to pray daily. Do not overcomplicate this! Just talk to God. Have that place and time where you can seek Him every day. If you do not plan to pray, you won’t. If you find it a challenge to disconnect from the busyness of your day, engaging in worship music is a great way to prepare your heart for prayer.

Theology of Suffering:

Suffering is an intrinsic part of the human experience. Throughout the pages of the Bible, we find profound insights into the theological meaning of suffering. As we embark on this new season and this year's 21-Day Prayer and Fasting Journey, we want to understand the purpose, the nature, and redemptive aspects of suffering from a biblical perspective:

One: Suffering in a Fallen World:

The Bible begins with the story of creation, portraying a world untainted by suffering. However, the entrance of sin through Adam and Eve's disobedience introduced suffering as a consequence (Genesis 3:16-19). Understanding suffering's roots in the fallen state of humanity helps believers grasp the broader narrative of redemption woven through Scripture.

Two: Suffering and God's Sovereignty

A key theme in the Bible is God's sovereignty over all aspects of life, including suffering. Job's story exemplifies how God, though allowing suffering, remains in control (Job 1:20-22; 42:1-6). The sovereignty of God invites believers to trust in His wisdom, even when facing inexplicable suffering, confident that He works all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Three: Suffering and Redemption through Christ

The heart of the Christian message centers on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The suffering and death of Jesus on the cross serve as the ultimate example of God's love and His plan for reconciling humanity (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24). Through Christ's suffering, believers find the promise of salvation, forgiveness of sins, and the hope of eternal life (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).

Four: Suffering as a Means of Spiritual Growth

The Bible teaches that suffering can refine and strengthen faith. James encourages believers to consider it joy when facing trials, as they produce perseverance and maturity (James 1:2-4). The apostle Paul also speaks of the transformative power of suffering, noting that it produces endurance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3-5).

Five: Sharing in Christ's Sufferings

The New Testament frequently emphasizes the idea of believers sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Paul expresses a desire to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, even if it means sharing in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). This shared experience of suffering deepens the bond between the believer and Christ, fostering a greater understanding of the sacrificial nature of love.

Conclusion

In the Bible, suffering is not a mere random occurrence, but an integral part of the larger narrative of God's redemptive plan. The theological perspective on suffering invites believers to trust in God's sovereignty, find hope in the redemption secured through Christ's sacrifice, and view trials as opportunities for spiritual growth. As we navigate the complexities of life, the Bible provides a foundation that transforms suffering from a mere struggle into a pathway towards deeper faith and communion with the divine.

During this fast, we are corporately (together as a church body) praying for:

- 1. Holiness:** High Places torn down, Strongholds broken, and broken places healed.
- 2. Empowerment:** Living in victory and being used by God for His Kingdom mission & purpose.
- 3. Community & Connection:** Actively connecting with others for accountability, strength, and impact.

Others you are personally praying for:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

WHAT ABOUT KIDS?

Should my children participate in the fast?

We believe it is a great idea for the **entire family** to set aside time each year to specifically and intensely focus on the most important thing in our lives, our relationship with Christ. Consider the information below as you pray and decide how your family, including your children, can participate as a collective part of the Clearpoint Church Fast.

Why should children participate?

1. To help children learn what is most important in life

Life can get very busy and if we don't purposefully slow down and set aside time to focus on strengthening our relationship with the Lord and modeling that importance for our children, they may believe other, more time-consuming things in our families' lives matter more. Be intentional about this. Set aside time to focus on what your relationship with Jesus means to you, in hopes that your devotion to Christ will become a part of your legacy for future generations. Learning the importance of Christ in our lives can serve as a firm foundation that will provide stability in your children's future.

2. Self-control should be practiced.

It can be so easy to become super self-focused. We live in a society of convenience and can become frustrated if we have to wait too long for our fries at the drive thru. We can develop an attitude of expectation and of constant satisfaction if we are not careful. Our lives can be driven and consumed by our desires to get what we want. This is reflected in the pace and mindset of the culture in which we live and interact daily. Fasting can help our children learn to practice self-control, to say "no" to self, to slow down, to focus on pleasing Christ more than pleasing self. Self-control and delayed gratification are life skills that will serve our children well in their futures.

3. Develop life-long disciplines

Prayer, Bible Study, listening to God, giving, and fasting are spiritual disciplines which should be an ongoing part of the lives of all believers. Our children are not going to reach their 18th birthday and begin to devote themselves to these disciplines. They must be trained along the way as a part of our investment in their spiritual lives. Just as we nurture our children by providing physical food, we must nurture our children by providing spiritual food. If we want our children to have a life-long commitment to prayer, we must lead them and teach them to pray. If we want them to have a life-long commitment to read, study, and depend on the Word of God, we must read the Word to them, allow them to see us reading and valuing scripture. We should quote, teach, and equip our children with scripture and lead them to meditate upon and memorize scripture. If we want to help our children depend upon Christ for leadership throughout life, we must teach and train them to listen to the voice of God. If we want our children to have the heart of *blessors*, we must allow them to see us bless others, and encourage them to be givers. We should provide opportunities for them to give sacrificially, to bless others and to give to those in need. If we want our children to devote their life to Christ and seek to know Him more, we must model and lead our children in the spiritual discipline of fasting. Our children should know what fasting is, why we participate, and how we expect God to move as we purposefully deny ourselves to give Him more of ourselves.

How should children participate in the fast?

As parents, pray and listen to God as you contemplate how to participate in the fast. He will speak to you! Give your children options you feel are meaningful, safe, and appropriate. Allow children some ownership in the decision they make as they consider and pray thru how they should participate in the fast. Children can begin to participate as soon as they begin to have a concept of God, as early as age 4 to 5. Celebrate every move toward developing spiritual disciplines. Lead your children in this area with loving encouragement. If they set a goal, encourage them toward it. If the goal they set was too difficult, love them and help them consider what led to missing the goal and how they can participate differently. We encourage you to resist the temptation to quit and encourage your children not to quit! Make adjustments, if necessary, but deeply ponder and consider the ramifications of quitting the fast before the corporate dates are fulfilled. Not only is the surrender to the fast meaningful to you and your family, but also the corporate devotion as a church body is “something bigger” that God calls us to be a part of as the BODY of Christ. Provide guidance but allow for choice as your children consider God’s will for their lives. It may surprise you how spiritually mature they are becoming! Below is a list of ideas and testimonies. These are only suggestions to help you begin to think about how your children can participate. Please know we are praying for each of you and your families as we embark upon this important journey of faith, together. **We would never force or coerce our children to participate but offer ideas and allow them to choose within guidelines we feel are safe and age appropriate.**

1. Very young children (4-7) can give up TV and electronics time and/or a favorite toy. When the child asks to play with the toy set aside during the fast or to watch TV, (or during the day’s normal TV/electronic time) encourage them to pray and read their Bible and remind them about their commitment choice. Our family loves *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (it is great for children and adults!) If Bible reading time is not a practice you have yet developed as a family, this may be a great time to begin! Let your children hear and see you praying and studying God’s word. Use your participation in the fast as a time to talk to them about the food you are eating and not eating and why. Share with them the story of Daniel. This can be a great time to teach children about the sacrifices we make, and the sacrifice God made on our behalf. Keep the time positive and encouraging, your children should not feel as if they are being punished, but rather choosing to make a sacrifice for something better! I bet they will LOVE Bible time with mom and/or dad as much or more than they loved their toy, device, or TV program. Begin planting the seeds of faith early and watch with amazement as they grow and blossom!
2. Children (8-14) can give up some food or food for one day under your leadership. Our children began giving up food for a day as early as 8 years of age and have changed their involvement each year. They decided how they wanted to participate, discussed their ideas with us and prayed about their involvement leading up to the fast. For example, Saturday may be a good day to fast all food, drink juice and have a glass of milk or a protein drink before bedtime. They may choose to fast from meat, sugar, or drink only water for 21 days. They may choose to make every Saturday a juice only day. Fasting can be scary! Teaching your children early can give them amazing confidence as they obey and dedicate themselves to the development of spiritual disciplines. You may wonder if it was hard as parents to witness our young children hungry and in need of food. It was very difficult, but also helped us better understand the heart of God as we fast as adults. It helped us admire our children for their strength, devotion, and determination to develop this spiritual discipline. It made our hearts move toward our children deeper than before as we wanted to bless them for their sacrifice and encourage them in their struggle. In all of this, we learned even better how God’s heart is moved toward us as we

fast. Children need to learn coping skills to deal with disappointment, discomfort, and struggle. Fasting is a great time to develop those skills.

3. Our children began participating FULLY in the fast as early as 14. It was very difficult to see our daughter going off to school for an entire day with nothing but a bottle of juice in her backpack knowing she had PE and other very difficult tasks to complete in the day as a growing, maturing young lady. It strengthened our prayer lives as we interceded hourly on her behalf. Literally, every time I struggled with hunger or weakness, I prayed for my daughter that her pain would be manageable. The interventions of God were nothing short of miraculous as she would come home and report the PE Coach was absent on the juice only days, so she did not have to work out or that the test had been postponed when she had been too tired and too weak to study as much as she wanted the night before. We began to realize how much it pleased God when we have a heart to deny ourselves to make more of Him in our lives! This is His plan, and he miraculously applauded and encouraged our child as she did the hard work of fasting. All of our faith grew as we celebrated the “wins” together and were amazed at how much God loved on us in the midst of our very real struggles.
4. Another great way to participate is by sacrificing something we want in order to bless others we feel led to bless or others we witness in need. For example, a child might donate their allowance or birthday money to the children’s ministry, give to their favorite mission project, purchase a gift for a single mother or give a gift to someone they have a heart to bless and encourage. The key to giving must be **sacrifice**. The child should give up something of personal value to bless someone else. This is also a great area in which we can lead our children. If God leads you to give a gift to someone, share that with your children as a step of obedience in your life and teach them about your struggles, victories, and the great blessing of being a vessel of giving that God can use to bless others.

We hope these thoughts and ideas will provide guidance and encouragement as you consider your family’s involvement in the fast. We believe we have been gifted to be a part of the family of God in the household of Clearpoint Church. It is our heart that all of God’s children would participate in some level during the fast this year. If you are new to Clearpoint, young in your faith, or just afraid of fasting, know we are praying for you and encourage you to start somewhere! If you need to start with some of the ideas for children and your entire family give up technology and/or TV, then begin there. If you are more mature in your faith, go ALL in and watch God supply all your needs and meet you in your want. He is faithful and will complete the work He is beginning in you this day. If you have particular needs or if you need encouragement, feel free to call, email, Facebook message, or stop by. We are in this together and look forward with eager anticipation to the amazing work God is going to do in His family of faith!

Fasting Calendar

Plan your fasting week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<i>Use this area of your fasting calendar to choose what days of the week you will fast and what each day will look like.</i>	<p>Day 1 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 2 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 3 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 4 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 5 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 6 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 7 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>
<i>This is a sample of what one variation of the Daniel Fast can look like and may include soy protein. You may also choose to exclude legumes & whole grains altogether & eat only fruits, vegetables & water (& soy protein)</i>	<p>Day 8 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 9 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 10 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 11 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 12 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 13 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 14 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>
<i>Some people also choose to modify their overall fasting plan to end with a special 3 day fast as indicated here. Again, these are just samples of what your fasting plan can look like.</i>	<p>Day 15 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 16 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 17 Fruits, Vegetables & water/Day</p> <p>Dinner- include legumes & whole grains</p>	<p>Day 18 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 19 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 20 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>	<p>Day 21 Juices & Water/ All Day</p>

FASTING INFORMATION & DEVOTIONS



Fasting Info: www.clearpointchurch.org/fast



Devotions: www.clearpointchurch.org/blog



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FASTING QUESTIONS



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Pre-Fast Lessons

Pre-Fast Lesson #1: You Can't Fast and Eat!

Text: II Corinthians 10:5

By Heather Lambert

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (II Corinthians 10:5)

For the past 13 years, I have committed to do the 21 day fast with the people of Clearpoint. Each year has revealed new and different struggles in my heart and life and produced new and different breakthroughs. I want to tell you about the huge breakthrough I experienced fasting in the very first year. When Brian approached me about the idea of the 21 day fast, I wish I could say I embraced the idea. I did not. (That resistant spirit should have been the first clue to me that God wanted to do a major work in my life through fasting and the enemy wanted to keep his strongholds.) I remember reluctantly committing to the fast saying, “Fine, it won’t even be hard for me, I don’t struggle with food.” Well, I was eating those words before the end of the first 24 hours!

Fasting is hard! Harder than I ever imagined. It takes discipline, commitment, and mental strength. It takes constantly taking every single thought and hunger pain captive and beating it into subjection to Christ and his desire for us to develop as spiritual warriors with great strength. II Corinthians 10:5 is a scripture I held to and recited numerous times daily. It teaches, *“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”*

I had to admit it, I was struggling. I was afraid this just wasn’t going to work for me. My mind began to grow weaker and weaker. I justified the idea of quitting. People who fasted in Biblical times did not have the demands of current life schedules, I thought. I had lost over 20 pounds and my thoughts were starting to get very foggy. I was working over 40 hours a week, going to grad school, parenting, and fulfilling obligations. I needed my strength! In my desperation, I found myself sitting on a stool in my pantry. Reasoning with myself turned into prayer and justifying myself to God.

One of the greatest things about fasting is creating space and developing the discipline to listen to God. Creflo Dollar says, “Prayer is simply communicating with God. It is not a monologue where you’re the only one talking. It is a dialog where you’re talking to God and he’s talking back to you.” In that pantry, in my time of weakness and desperation, I had a great conversation with God. I was trying to devise a way to satisfy the letter of the law and continue the fast and to eat. I remember asking God if I put some crackers in the blender and added some water and blended them up finely, made them liquid, then would I still be keeping to the fast? (I told you I was desperate for food.) I remember the Lord clearly saying to me, “Eat. I will love you no more if you continue the fast and no less if you break the fast.” That moment, that revelation unlocked some performance-based idea of love of Christ and set me free. God loves me completely no matter my actions! His love is not dependent on my goodness, but His. Then, the Lord said, “But you can’t eat and fast.” I was instantly reminded of Matthew 6:24, “No one can **serve two masters**, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You **cannot serve** God and money.” In my case, I could not serve God and my comfort or my food. For the first time in my walk with Christ, I wanted to serve him out of LOVE, not out of obligation or expectancy. I cried out to him for strength, left the place of temptation in the pantry and fellowshiped in my new understanding of a God who loves me, perfectly!

Pre-Fast Lesson #2: Return to Me

Text: Joel 2:12

By Brian Lambert

Now, therefore," says the LORD, "Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." (Joel 2:12, NKJV)

If we look at the kind of fasting that took place in the Old Testament, it would be easy to assume that the reason we fast is to prove our repentance to God in order to obtain His mercy. Under the Old Covenant, a fast of repentance is seen time and time again. But now, because of the complete work of Jesus on the cross, things have changed.

Fasting is not something we do to obtain favor or forgiveness. Under the New Covenant, every wrong thing we have done and will do was forgiven at the Cross, and when we accept Christ as our Savior, we get to celebrate the mercy freely given to us through our relationship with Him. Fasting is about drawing closer to God and surrendering at a deeper level.

As we walk with God, there are times that we feel far from Him or disconnected. Joel's words resonate with us even if we live in the context of grace: "Return to me with all your heart." There are times we realize that though we have chosen to follow Jesus, the flame of our love for Him has grown cold.

Your time spent in prayer each day of the fast can result in a rich and rewarding connection with the Father. No matter where you are on your journey with Jesus, you can always take a step closer to Him.

Quote: I believe the power of fasting as it relates to prayer is the spiritual atomic bomb that our Lord has given us to destroy the strongholds of evil and usher in a great revival and spiritual harvest around the world. – Bill Bright

Prayer Focus: As we begin this time of prayer and fasting, let's turn our hearts toward God. Make a commitment to seek Him daily. Pray that your love for Christ will be increased and your passion for Him will be reignited over the next twenty- one days.

Pre-Fast Lesson #3: False Beliefs about Fasting

Text: Philippians 4:11-13; Mark 2:18-20

By Heather Lambert

Two great lies can keep you from committing to begin and complete the 21 days of prayer and fasting.

1. It is too hard; I can't do it.

In Philippians 4:11-13 Paul teaches about the attitude of an overcomer, he says, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

Through beatings, imprisonments, and all kinds of difficulty, Paul had found contentment. Even in times of hunger he learned how to depend on the strength given by Christ. I believe we can especially learn to depend on Christ in the difficult times, including the times of hunger. It creates space for God to do a great work in you. Romans 8:35-37 teaches that we don't just have spiritual strength through Christ, but that we can do more than overcome. God intends for us to live a blessed fulfilled life as victors. The scriptures teach, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." This important passage is not teaching us that life will be easy, in fact it is teaching us to expect difficulty. However, those difficult times don't rule us, they don't steal our joy, nor do they overtake us. Fasting helps us develop and flex that faith muscle that leads us to trust the deep, abiding love of Christ. Through his love we have strength and the ability to live life as victors!

2. Fasting doesn't matter. God doesn't call me to fasting.

When reading Mark 2:18-20, you can see Jesus expects his followers to fast. "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." Two great life applications can be found from Jesus' response to the Pharisees. First, being in the presence of Christ is a celebration. The disciples had no need to fast when they were physically in the presence of the Lord. Second, Jesus understood the need to fast for strength and direction. Jesus communicated the expectation of fasting for strength and clarity. He knew his disciples would need to fast to draw from his strength when he was no longer physically present.

We have access to that same strength as we commit to fast and boldly seek the presence of the Lord.

Pre-Fast Lesson #4: Fasting Removes Unbelief

Text: Matthew 17:18-21

By Brian Lambert

And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour.

¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁰ So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

²¹ "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17:18-21, NKJV)

When we pray and fast, we don't do so to change God or His will; instead, by praying and fasting, we are the ones being changed. Aligning ourselves with God helps us curb our doubts and fears. When we pray and fast, the thing that leaves us is our unbelief. It is when we have faith to believe that we can pray with confidence and know that "nothing will be impossible."

Ask God to strengthen your heart to fully believe Him and His Word. It is okay to acknowledge that you struggle with unbelief. That's the first step in allowing God to strengthen your faith and bring you into alignment with His plan for your life.

What do you need faith to believe God for right now? Align yourself with God's Word and will during this fast. Release your unbelief. Pray with confidence knowing "nothing will be impossible" for you.

Pre-Fast Lesson #5: Bootcamp

Text: Matthew 6:21

By Heather Lambert

Brian and I have spent a lot of time talking about our desire to be physically fit. We have several DVD packages whose infomercials promise to give us the fit bodies we desire. We had an elliptical. We have weights and workout equipment to rival any gym. We even bought a Groupon for a boot camp a few years ago. Five days a week for six weeks at 5 am promised the result of a fit, healthy body. I will never forget how excited we were about the FIRST day of the camp. After about 10 minutes, Brian was kneeling by the fence praying he would not be sick. I thought I was going to have to call in sick to work, because I physically could not stand on my wobbly legs. But we pushed through and went back the next day. It was not better, it was worse. We were so sick and so weak. This was killing us! We liked the idea of fit, sculpted, healthy bodies, but the truth was it was just too hard for us. We quit. We didn't decide to quit, we just skipped one day, then two, then a week, then the whole month had passed, and we had gone to boot camp 4 times, not 24. We were not transformed; we were the same. Our desire to be fit proved to be weaker than our desire for comfort.

Fasting is definitely spiritual bootcamp. It is hard, very hard. Many people will quit, many people will not even start. Our desire to be spiritually fit must be stronger than our desire for comfort *if* we want change and spiritual maturity. Jesus teaches some things in our life can only come about by the practice of prayer and fasting. Life requires great spiritual strength which comes only from a commitment to the spiritual practices of prayer and fasting. In Mark 9 the disciples tried to heal a man's son who was demon possessed. They were unable, so Jesus comes on the scene, speaking to the father:

Jesus said to him, If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help you my unbelief. When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying to him, You dumb and deaf spirit, I charge you, come out of him, and enter no more into him. And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; so that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up; and he arose. And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said to them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting. (Mark 9:23-29, AKJV)

You can see that prayer and fasting were a commitment of Christ. They gave him spiritual strength. Our desire to be used mightily by God for His work, must be greater than our desire for food and comfort. I am convinced this spiritual discipline can unlock so many areas of our life where sin and the enemy have held us trapped. That is why it is such a struggle! The enemy wants to steal our opportunity for a breakthrough to walk in spiritual strength. I know the battle that will be waging in your mind as you consider beginning the fast and struggle to honor the commitment to stay true to it for 21 days! I believe there is a work God wants to do in your life, in the life of our church that will only come about as we commit to push through and pray and fast collectively for 21 days. We cannot quit, only God knows what great breakthrough lies on the other side of our commitment to pray and fast. This can't be about us! Someone needs us to stick with it, their very life may depend on our spiritual breakthrough, our spiritual strength and power! We can, we must do it!

Fasting Devotions

Fast Devotional - Day One

Person Suffering: Adam & Eve

Written by: Heather Lambert

Thoughts

Genesis 2 explains the seventh day of God's creation and God's unfolding plan for mankind. As you read you begin to get a visual picture of the beauty of the garden as a beautiful place of perfection! Then, verse 15 tells us that the Lord took man and put him in Eden. Man was given simple instructions to tend and keep the garden and to enjoy the fruit from every tree *except* the tree of knowledge. God gave Adam the idea that this was for his protection, because if he ate from this tree, he would die. As Adam is in the garden, the Lord created Eve as a helper for Adam. Eve was God's perfect solution to the aloneness of man. (vs. 18) God created a beautiful garden, put Adam and Eve in the midst of this perfect garden, and issued only one requirement. For a moment, everything was beautiful! Then, in Chapter 3, we are introduced to the serpent. The serpent comes and questions the word of God and the goodness of God. He tempts Eve to question God's goodness too. Eve could see the fruit, she could see that it looked good, and she wanted the knowledge the enemy convinced her was being withheld from her by a not-so-good God. Then, she convinced Adam to eat of the fruit too. **In that moment, death began.** This is the very instant when suffering began. Adam's and Eve's disobedience was truly doubting the goodness of God. This is when suffering always begins! Can you see it? Have you been there? Do you sometimes feel God is withholding something good from you? Do you doubt his love for you? Do you struggle to believe that he is really good?

Dear Friend, please consider God's next actions! He issues the consequence for their failure to obey, then he kills an animal and makes a covering for Adam and Eve. Before their sin, they had no need for covering. After their sin, their need for covering caused them to hide from God. (Ch 3 vs 9) Because of their new need, God made a covering for this sin laden couple so they would no longer need to hide. See how good God is? Although Adam and Eve had disobeyed, although Adam and Eve had consequences for their sin, God still made a way for them to have relationship with him! This first sacrifice is a picture of the perfect sacrifice to come. That prophesy is first whispered in Gen. 3:15 when God tells the serpent of the coming One who will bruise Satan's head and Satan will bruise Eve's offspring's heel. This is the prophesy of the perfect sacrifice that will hang on the cross with nails through his wrist and heels as the perfect and final sacrifice for man. One day, as a descendant from Eve, (Mary) Jesus would be born. The coming Christ would take away the sins of the world (Hebrews 10:11) and mankind would have the promise of being returned to God's perfectly designed home (John 14:3).

Challenge

If you are suffering today, if you have suffered in your life, stop, and ask, "Do I doubt the goodness of God?" Has the enemy been right there tempting you with deception and causing you to believe we have a not-so-good God? Has that sin of doubting God's goodness caused you to hide? Are you desperate for a covering so you can return to peace? God has made the way! He does not want us to suffer, miserable in our sin, alone in a world with no good One who truly cares! He wants us to know how much he loves us, He chooses us, His plans for us are good, not full of pain and harm! (Jer. 29:11) We can trust in Him, and this is when our suffering begins to lift. This is when we run toward him. This is when we are comforted by his loving embrace. (Luke 15:20) Today is the day your suffering can end. Get out of hiding and ask him for covering! He will give you freedom and trust in his perfect goodness!

Prayer

Father God, YOU ARE GOOD! Thank you for reminding us of that eternal truth today. Father, forgive us when we give in to the age-old temptation to doubt your goodness. Lift our suffering as we choose to run toward you. May we always trust your love, care, forgiveness, and perfect plan for our lives! Father, today as we read these scriptures, we pause and give thanks to you, the One from whom ALL blessings flow. Every good gift we have is from you! (James 1:17). When we are tempted to doubt your goodness, take us back to the scene in the garden of Eden, help us to rebuke Satan and choose obedience. We love you and we believe you love us!
AMEN!

Fast Devotional – Day Two

Person Suffering: Cain & Abel

Written by: Brian Lambert

Thoughts

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis in Genesis Chapter 4 is a powerful story that highlights the complexities of human relationships, sin, and the consequences of our actions. This story, found in the book of Genesis, offers valuable insights that can inspire deep reflection and personal growth, and one that can bring insight to situations of personal and relational suffering.

Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve, and their story begins with offerings they were instructed to bring to God. Abel, who was a shepherd, offered the "firstborn of his flock," while Cain, a farmer, offered some of the "fruits of the soil." God looked favorably upon Abel's offering but did not look favorably upon Cain's. This led to feelings of jealousy and anger in Cain, ultimately resulting in the murder of his brother Abel.

The story of Cain and Abel is a reflection of the destructive power of envy and resentment. It highlights the consequences of allowing negative emotions to fester and drive us to commit acts of harm against others. It also emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility and the impact of our choices on ourselves and those around us.

From this story, we can draw several important thoughts and lessons:

1. Jealousy and envy can lead to destructive actions.
2. The consequences of our actions, whether good or bad, can have far-reaching effects that can change the course of our life.
3. We are called to be responsible for our thoughts and actions, and to resist the temptation to let negative emotions control us.

Challenge:

Reflect on the story of Cain and Abel and identify areas in your own life where jealousy, envy, or resentment are influencing your thoughts and actions. Consider how you can respond to these emotions in a way that aligns biblical values and beliefs. Take intentional steps to choose forgiveness, compassion, and understanding over bitterness and hostility.

Prayer

Father, help me to recognize and address the seeds of jealousy and envy within me. Give me the strength to resist the temptation to act on negative emotions and guide me in choosing love and compassion instead. May I live each day with a spirit of forgiveness and grace, seeking to build others up rather than tear them down. Amen.

Fast Devotional – Day Three

Person Suffering: Joseph

Written by: Shayne Gatlin

Thoughts

The story of Joseph's life is an amazing journey of trials, tribulations, and God's goodness through it all. In Genesis 37:4, we find out that Joseph is the youngest & favorite son of Jacob: "Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age." One day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph, a beautiful robe. As you can imagine, his brothers did not really appreciate that Joseph received the gift and was their father's favorite. The bible says, "They couldn't say a kind word to him." Because of this and dreams Joseph shared they hatched a plan to kill him. Luckily for them they decided to sell him into slavery instead.

Genesis 39 picks up after Joseph has been sold into slavery and is serving in Potiphar's house who is an Egyptian Officer. Joseph was such a huge blessing to Potiphar that he put Joseph in charge of his entire household. The bible says that Potiphar's affairs ran smoothly. Then comes Joseph's next trial; Potiphar's wife finds Joseph attractive. She tries to seduce him, but he refuses, then she accuses him of trying to rape her. Potiphar was furious when he heard the story and had Joseph thrown into jail.

Joseph had been betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery; now at the end of Genesis 39, we find him in jail for a crime he didn't commit! I don't know about you, but I'm sure Genesis 39 ends with him sitting around moping and whining about how unfair things have been and how hard his life has been. NO, of course that is not what happens; in Genesis 39:22-23. Before long, the warden put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners and over everything that happens in the prison. The warden had no more worries because Joseph took care of everything. As I read the beginning of Joseph's story (Continue through chapter 50 to finish his amazing God led journey), I'm amazed at the way he responds and shows up after some of the things that happen to him and how life has shaken out so far. I can struggle in tough seasons and start looking at the pain and struggle that I'm going through and start to feel stuck, overwhelmed, or even frustrated with God and my circumstances. I think about the Fostering and Adoption journey that the Lord called Teresa & me on. This journey has challenged us and turned our worlds upside down and sideways. This journey has created laughter, joy, pain, sorrow, hurt, frustration, and so many other emotions I could name. There have been so many days that I've cried out to God, why did you choose us to go on this journey, it's too hard, I don't have enough love, patience, endurance, steadfastness.... I imagine there were days that Joseph felt that and maybe even thought that. The one thing the Bible tells us over and over in his story in the book of Genesis is that God was with Him: 39:2, 3, 21, & 23. Pastor Brian shared in one of his messages in December that we're to "ABIDE" = To Remain Stable or Fixed on the Lord. This is how Joseph remained faithful through his journey and the Lord was with him.

When I reflect on my life so far, I can look back and see the peaks and the valleys, and those times I was able to have Joy through those seasons are the ones where I was walking close to our Lord. I was "Abiding" in Him.

Challenge

My challenge to you today, is to examine your walk and see if you're "Abiding" in the Lord. Are you talking with Him, getting to know Him through His Word, fellowshiping with other believers, and truly allowing Him to guide your life? If the answer is YES, then continue to remain or ABIDE in Him. If the answer is NO, then I will challenge you to start today!

Fast Devotional – Day Four

Person Suffering: Hannah

Written by: Nicole Lossie

1 Samuel begins with the story of Hannah and her faithfulness to boldly ask the Lord to bless her with a son. Hannah was one of two wives and was the only one who struggled with conceiving a child. She was ridiculed by the other wife for her inability to bear children. This went on for years, and the sadness and torment got the best of Hannah as she is described as being reduced to tears and unable to eat. Hannah's story takes a drastic turn when she makes a bold prayer to the Lord, asking for a son. She then promises that if he grants her a son, that she will then give him back to the Lord. She prays so intently that the priest of the temple thought her to be drunk. After this prayer, she demonstrates her resolve in God's goodness by eating again and no longer crying. She then proceeds to become pregnant with the prophet and leader Samuel.

Thoughts

It can be so hard when we find ourselves in a waiting season, but facing judgment from others can make it even harder. God calls us to trust and follow Him regardless of our surroundings. All of us have gone or will go through seasons of grieving, waiting, and blessing. I have struggled in the past with tying my worth into accomplishing certain goals or having the same things as others and have had some big feelings when God didn't give me what I wanted when I wanted it. The story of Hannah challenges us to place our trust in God's good plans and His timeline for us. If Hannah had not endured the struggle of infertility, would she have committed her child to God in the way that she did?

Challenge

After the birth of Samuel, Hannah prays, "For all the earth is the Lord's and He has set the world in order." (1 Samuel 2:8) Can you look back at a time of hardship with a perspective of trying to see and appreciate God's order? If the answer to that question is yes, then take a moment to praise God for the goodness that was entwined in that journey. If the answer is no, perhaps now is the time to ask God to help you look back on those events with new eyes. If you are in a season of waiting, I challenge you to pray boldly for that thing that you are waiting for with a believing heart, but also for Him to give you peace with His timing in this season. Sometimes we become so focused on the desires of our heart that we fail to see the love and faithfulness God has for us. It is important to remember that the fruition of God's plan for us is not dependent on our timeline.

Prayer

Father God, I ask you to please forgive me for the times that I put my list of wants and my criteria for success at a greater value than your good plans for me. Please help me release any worldly standards that I have allowed to be held over me and guide me to the peacefulness and joy that only YOU can provide. Lord, I thank you for listening to my prayers for the things that I want in my life. I thank you for the blessings that you have provided and the blessings that you still have in store for me.

Fasting Devotional – Day Five

Person Suffering: Elijah

Written by: Todd Houston

Thoughts

The reading of 1 Kings 17 -19 provides all the attributes of a good movie. You have good vs. evil, heartache and triumph, comedy, the supernatural, suspense, and much more. In Chapter 17, Elijah declared the start of a drought where God provided food for Elijah via a raven and later through a village widow. This story is intriguing because the widow is FIRST (verse 13) asked to provide bread from the last of her flour and oil to Elijah before the expected last meal for her and her young son. When she obeyed, God provided for both Elijah, her, and her son each day going forward. Even though God provided their food, the widow's son still got sick and died. God once again brought about a miracle by bringing the son back to life. Both miracles were used to solidify the widow's faith in God and in Elijah's message.

Chapter 18 focuses on a showdown between God and the worshippers of Baal. God via the prophet Elijah challenged the pagan prophets to see which God would answer their calls to consume the bull sacrifices. All of Israel was invited to watch as the 450 prophets of Baal take all day trying to get Baal to show up. Elijah started mocking, and the prophets resorted to cutting themselves to get Baal's attention. Baal never showed; Elijah asked God to prove He was the God of Israel. God showed up big by sending fire to consume the water-soaked wood, sacrifice, stones, and even the dust. There was no denying "The Lord – He is God! Yes, the Lord is God!" as proclaimed in verse 39.

Despite this miracle, the slaughter of the Baal prophets, and the lifting of the draught in chapter 19, Elijah fled out of fear when threatened by the evil queen Jezebel. Elijah felt alone and ready to give up, but God had more to say and do through Elijah. The Lord showed Elijah a storm, an earthquake, and a fire; just to remind Elijah that His voice also comes in a gentle whisper. Despite Elijah's fear and hiding, God reminded Elijah of His promises to Israel, that he was not the only believer left, and that God was still preparing others to come behind Elijah to carry on His plan.

Prayer

I pray this passage encourages and reminds you that despite your trials, your fears, and even the alone times, YOU are not forsaken. The God of 1 Kings is still YOUR provider, He is still YOUR place of refuge, He is still working in YOU, and He is still making plans for YOUR future; all for the purposes seen by the widow in chapter 17, by the people of Israel in Chapter 18, and Elijah himself in Chapter 19. God does it ALL to solidify our faith in Him; we praise and worship Him, and proclaim to the world that "The Lord – He is God, Yes, the Lord is God."

Fasting Devotional – Day Six

Person Suffering: Hosea

Written by: Dawn Houston

Thoughts

Hosea has all the things we long for in a good love story. Love, betrayal, pursuit, forgiveness, redemption, and faithfulness. Hosea, a prophet of God, is told by the Lord to marry Gomer, a wayward woman. This marriage runs parallel and points to the covenant relationship between God and His wayward people. Just like Gomer is unfaithful to Hosea, God's chosen people, Israel, have been unfaithful to Him. Gomer leaves Hosea for other men just as Israel chased after other loves. This causes me to look inward at what other loves do I turn to besides God. Marriage is a covenant between a man, a woman, and God. It is a beautiful example of what God can do when two broken people commit to never give up on one another and allow God to work. Hosea commits and never gives up on Gomer despite her betrayal. He goes after her, forgives her, and remains faithful to his covenant with her. God is relentless in His pursuit of us. He longs for us to turn back to Him and allow Him to love us.

In relationships, many times we must allow God to work in our heart to love and forgive when we are hurt. I have found when I look to God to show me how to love and forgive rather than make it about me and how I feel at that moment, He softens my heart and allows me to love as He loves me. Romans 5:8, tells us, "God demonstrates His own love for us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." He didn't wait for me to get my act together. In marriage, as in any relationship, we will go through struggles. Some will be because of our sin, and some will not. We need to seek the Lord for our own forgiveness and trust him to be faithful in restoring our relationship. God has a plan for us and a plan for our marriage. Sin is ugly; sin put Jesus on the cross. God can bring about a beautiful love story if we turn our struggles, sin, heartache, and betrayal over to him. He is for us, and He is for our marriages. God blessed Hosea and Gomer's marriage due to a faithful husband who was willing to trust God and was faithful to the calling on his life.

Challenge

I challenge you as we continue seeking the Lord through prayer and fasting to reflect on these things. What sin is God revealing today? Is there forgiveness that needs to be extended to your spouse or another relationship? Do you have any loves that you are running to other than God? The greatest love story of all times is ours and our God. Choose today to pursue Him and make Him your first Love. He has chosen you!

Prayer

Fasting Devotional – Day Seven

Person Suffering: Ezekiel

Written by: Glenda Spence

Thoughts

The book of Ezekiel is a prophetic book that contains the visions and messages of Ezekiel, a priest who God calls to be a prophet. God uses Ezekiel to warn His people of judgement, call them to repentance and give them hope when they are in the valley of their captivity. In Ezekiel 2:8 (AMP), God instructs Ezekiel to “eat” what He was giving him. ⁸“As for you, son of man, listen to what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I am giving you.”

When you eat something, it becomes part of you forever. We sometimes “read” God’s Word, but He wants us to feast on His Word. It is to become part of our very being and everyday lives. In Ezekiel 37:1-10 (The Valley of Dry Bones) God gives an example of why Ezekiel needed to consume His words. He commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and say exactly what God says about them. The words of the Lord gave the bones complete restoration to life. His words will do the same for us.

We are in a better covenant than Ezekiel’s time. How much more can we rely on His words to restore us to life? It is hard when you are in the middle of the valley, and the problem gets in the way of our remembering that God “supplies ALL our needs according to His riches” (Philippians 4:19). We must remember (feast on) all the promises He has given us. We must “call those things that be not as though they were” (Romans 4:17). We must say what God says about ourselves, all the circumstances we face, and remember He is our source.

Challenge

As we are going through our “valley” of fasting from our favorite foods. Begin now to feast on God’s word as the source of our daily bread.

Prayer

Fasting Devotional – Day Eight

Person Suffering: Esther

Written by: Cindy Dickerson

Thoughts

Soon after Esther is established as queen, she experiences “great distress” upon hearing that a decree has been issued throughout the entire kingdom to destroy all her family and community, the Jewish people (4:3-4). Haman, a conniving man, and constant adversary, who works closely with the king schemed to get this fatal decree in motion (3:9). Esther’s Uncle Mordecai forms a plan to protect the Jewish people, when Esther is informed of her role in the plan, her distress leads her to recite the King’s law that could bring death, instead of God’s Word that brings life (4:11). Distress can work as a signal that indicates the voice of the flesh and the voice of the spirit are in a dispute.

Esther’s Distress subsides when Mordecai reminds her of God’s promise in deliverance for the Jews. He encourages her to be a part of God’s work and tells her that the help for the Jews could come from the two of them working together, or that help will arise from another place (4:14). With Mordecai’s encouragement, Esther’s distress is replaced with a boldness to trust God and His plan, and she no longer fears death. Esther’s first productive work as queen is when she calls on her community to fast (4:16). Fasting is a sure way to settle the flesh/spirit dispute, it decreases the flesh’s voice and increases the spirit’s voice. The message of the flesh brings distress, urges you to save yourself, get a firm grip, be in control, but the message of the spirit brings peace, reminds you that the battle is the Lord’s, loosen your grip and know God is in control.

In the end, Haman’s ultimate plan of destruction works against him, falling to his own death on the pole that was meant for Mordecai (7:10). Esther’s final request has her falling at the feet of the King, as he extends his gold scepter. She pleads for safety for her and her people, and requests that a new edict be written to overrule Haman’s command to destroy the Jewish people. The King consents and provides the rights for the Jewish people to protect themselves and to annihilate anyone who might attack them. God’s plan prevails. The book of Esther closes with a time of joy and feasting for the people of God, “In every providence and in every city to which the edict of the King came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating...” (8:17). It is easy to get discouraged entering a time of fast but know that God is always preparing the feast.

Challenge

What brings you “great distress”? Share your response with someone and ask him/her to partner with you in praying and fasting. Journal and watch how the Lord works through this time of being faithful and waiting. Then, celebrate by sharing with others about how God works in this situation.

Prayer

Lord, when our hearts are troubled with fear and worry, I pray you would remind us to call on you to replace our distress with the peace that only you can give.

Fasting Devotional – Day Nine

Person Suffering: Job

Written by: Steve Christopherson

Thoughts

So here I am sitting on the couch with a broken foot, crutches, and a boot. I can't ride my Harley, drum, or play softball. I can't vacuum, wash the dishes, or do the laundry. (Okay I better back down from some of that)! I can't get my iPhone to pair with my Apple watch, and it's going to rain tomorrow. Woe is me; I'm feeling really blue! Then I open an email from Pastor Brian asking me to write a devotional for the fast, what is it on? Job!!!!. Are you kidding me?!?!? Job?!?!? There went my pity party! During a 21 day fast, we can find ourselves easily complaining or griping about what we are having to do. That's because we go into it with the wrong attitude.

The beauty about the book of Job is that it shows us Job's attitude with God. We start out with God blessing Job, but Satan said, "He's only following You because he is blessed, but if You took away the blessings, he would not follow You." So, God withheld his protection, but told Satan he could not have his life. So, we see several things happen to Job like the loss of 10 of his children and his wealth destroyed through disease and invaders. Job had other difficulties like his closest friends trying to blame him, saying he had done something sinful. Also, his wife just said cry out and curse God, and maybe He'll take your life and end the suffering. But Job knew he had been godly, and ultimately just questioned God. And God replied in a way that said, "You don't know my ways and I do, therefore, you're going to have to trust me." In other words, it was a model for all of us. God is the one in charge, and the purpose of the fast is to help us realize that. If we only worship Him and praise Him when things are good, then that proves nothing. There's a saying that says, "grow through what you go through".

Challenge

As you go through this fast and feel some type of suffering, even self-imposed, use it to praise God, because it really is a good thing that He knows His ways and we only have to trust in His goodness and wisdom. Since I know everyone that reads this has some sort of discomfort or suffering in their lives, I want to encourage you to focus on the dependence we all have on God who can work all things out for good to those that love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for being gentle with us and leading us to your will. Forgive us when we get petty and whiny about all the little things that ultimately don't matter. Draw us into your presence and help us focus on your love, protection, and provision. In Jesus name, Amen!

Now, where did I put those crutches? Did I tell you I broke my foot? 😊

Fasting Devotional – Day Ten

Person Suffering: David

Written by: Ofel Gonzalez

Thoughts

“The Lord is with him”. Throughout the life of David, there were struggles, heavy burdens, sufferings, death, betrayal, loneliness, and so many emotions that one can relate to in our daily lives. Even through all the suffering, one quote that was repeated was, *“The Lord is with him”*. Let’s start at the beginning. Jesse of Bethlehem had 8 children including David as the youngest. Being the youngest in modern day comes with a lot of perks but during the Old Testament, being the youngest meant you were weak, cast aside, unnoticed, useless, and not important. David suffered being the youngest and pushed around by his brothers as well as being someone who no one really cared about. As you can read in chapter 16, David was the last person to be called by his father. However, even though David was the youngest, God used the last person anyone would expect to be the king of Israel who would kill many philistines, honor God, and bring Him glory because God was with him. Another example is the famous story of David and Goliath. Even though David was inexperienced in warfare, he had confidence not in himself or his skill but in God. In 1 Samuel 17:43, “David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” David defeats his Goliath by defending and glorifying God even though many people probably thought that he was going to be crushed. God uses his shortcomings of being inexperienced and young to show God’s mighty power.

Moving forward through David’s life, in 2 Samuel chapter 12, David’s child died due to his sin. David prayed and fasted for God to save his child, but He did not. However, I want to highlight that even though the suffering of his own doing pained him, the first thing he did was, “he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped”. Through all the pain and agony, David worshipped the Lord with his heart which shaped him to trust the Lord through future hardships. Another example of David’s suffering was in 2 Samuel 15 where his son, Absalom, rebelled against him and he had to flee and be persecuted by his son. Many of his personal advisors betrayed him over to his son which caused David to feel broken. However, instead of focusing on his own suffering and emotions, he redirected his focus to trusting God so His will could be glorified. Lastly, 2 Samuel 22 shows David’s song of Praise where he praises God through all his shortcomings and struggles but also praises God through all the victories that God made possible. David doesn’t praise his strength but gives God all the glory.

Challenge

David went through more than what I mentioned in 2 Samuel, but if there is one thing that we can learn from David, was his faithfulness and honor to God. All David did when he was going through a hard time was go to the father first and worship through all the doubts, fears, anxiety, emotions, sufferings, and thoughts. I challenge you as we take this fast together, to find a way to glorify God through whatever you are going through right now. It can be a life decision, financial issues, family issues, work, relationship issues, school, health, mental health, etc. Once you know what is troubling you, go to the father, worship him, and repeat this short prayer.

Prayer

“Father, thank you for all the provisions you have given me in my life. You are my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my refuge when I am troubled. Lord, I want to glorify and exalt you with my life. Help me to not focus on my situation or my own strength and skills but to trust you so I can glorify you through my suffering.”

Fasting Devotional – Day Eleven

Person Suffering: Naaman

Written by: Brian Lambert

Thoughts

Personal suffering is often a consequence of our own personal choices. The story of Naaman in II Kings Chapter 5 gives us insights into the journey from pride to humility and the transformative power of surrendering to God's will.

Naaman, a commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a man of great standing and was well known throughout all of Israel. However, he was afflicted with leprosy, a debilitating and socially stigmatizing disease. In search of a cure, Naaman approached the Prophet Elisha for healing. Elisha instructed Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan River, a seemingly simple and humble act. Initially resistant and prideful, Naaman was reluctant to comply, expecting a grand and dramatic display of miraculous healing instead.

After being persuaded by his servants, Naaman eventually humbled himself and obeyed Elisha's instructions, although it didn't make sense how the dirty water of the Jordan could heal him. To his amazement, he emerged from the Jordan River with his flesh restored like that of a young boy, free from the leprosy that had plagued him. Through this experience, Naaman learned experienced the effects of humility and the transformative power of obedience to God's will.

There are a few important lessons we learn from Naaman's story:

1. Pride can hinder our ability to receive the blessings and healing that God offers.
2. True humility requires a willingness to set aside our expectations and surrender to God's wisdom.
3. God's healing and transformative work often come in unexpected and humble forms.

Challenge

Today, examine areas of pride and self-sufficiency in your own life that may be hindering your ability to accept help, healing, or guidance from others, and from God. Consider how you can adopt a spirit of humility and openness to the ways in which God may be working in your life, even when it challenges your expectations.

Prayer

Father, help me recognize and release the pride and self-sufficiency that may be blocking me from experiencing your healing and transformative work in my life. Grant me the humility to surrender to your wisdom and to trust in the unexpected ways in which you choose to work. May I be open to receiving your blessings with a heart of gratitude and obedience. Amen.

Fasting Devotional – Day Twelve

Person Suffering: Jonah

Written by: Haley Christopherson

Thoughts

When we think about Old Testament prophets, there are some names that we would hold in high esteem and consider to be heroes of the faith. Jonah, however, does not have the respectable reputation of some other prophets like Isaiah or Elijah. Jonah is remembered for his disobedience. When the word of the Lord came to him and gave him the command to go to Nineveh to call the people to repentance, Jonah went the opposite direction and fled to Tarshish.

Things obviously don't go well for Jonah. After spending a few nights in the belly of a fish, he eventually finds himself in Nineveh where the Lord had commanded him to go. It is here where we learn Jonah's motivation for his disobedience. After reluctantly calling the people of Nineveh to repent, the people listened and repented. Jonah 3:10 says, "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened." The forgiveness that God offered Nineveh is precisely why Jonah didn't want to go there. He even says, "That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew the wickedness of Nineveh, and he did not want them to experience the grace of God, because they clearly did not deserve it.

Challenge

Ultimately, Jonah's disobedience stems from one main thing: he wanted his way over God's way. We shouldn't be too hard on Jonah. His decision looks a lot like us sometimes. We know God's plan is best, but we oftentimes prefer things to be done our way instead. Evan and I had no problem getting pregnant with Zoe. We thought baby #2 would be just as easy. But it wasn't. We couldn't get pregnant for over a year. I had several moments where I thought having another baby wasn't going to be in the cards for us, and I doubted God's plan. Our story isn't nearly as difficult as others, but one thing was made clear to us: God knows what he's doing. Trusting his plan and following his Word will always be better than doing things our own way. We may not hear the audible voice of God like Jonah did, but as Peter says, we have the prophetic word surer (2 Pet 1:19). As Psalm 119:105 says, His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Denying ourselves and following his word will lead us to life. If you're struggling with an area of disobedience that directly violates the Word of God, consider this your sign to leave it behind. It can never satisfy you the way you want it to.

Prayer

Lord, you are sovereign and holy. None of us deserve your grace, but as Jonah rightly stated, you are a gracious God, full of mercy and slow to anger but abounding in steadfast love. Give us the ability to trust you and your plans over our own, knowing that you work all things together for our good and your glory. Amen.

Fasting Devotional – Day Thirteen

Person Suffering: Daniel

Written by: Sarah Hale

Thoughts

The book of Daniel follows Daniel from the time he was taken into captivity in Babylon as a teenager. Daniel was one of the faithful Jews that stayed true to God even when taken to a strange land. Continuing to follow God made him different and caused him to stand out. Turns out the more he followed God, the more his efforts were blessed. Daniel continued to be promoted higher and higher in the government where he served. As you can imagine, this caused much jealousy among his fellow officials in the government.

In Daniel 6, Darius the Mede is king. Daniel (now around age 80) has become one of three administrators. He serves so well that Darius plans to set him over the whole kingdom. The other administrators decided to find charges against him, but since Daniel was “trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent” (v 4), they could find nothing against him. The jealous men went to Darius and tricked him into issuing an edict that said anyone that prayed to any god or person other than the king would be thrown into the lion’s den. The men knew that Daniel would not stop praying to his God. When Daniel was seen praying, the men went to Darius and insisted he enforce the edict.

As he was brought to the lion’s den, the king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!” (v 16) Darius believed that Daniel’s God could save him!

When the king hurried the next morning to check on Daniel, he discovered that Daniel’s God had sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions (v 21). Darius was overjoyed. He proceeded to have the men who had falsely accused Daniel thrown into the lion’s den along with their families. The king then issued a decree that in every part of his kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel (v 26).

Challenge

Daniel’s story challenges us to remain steadfast in our faith even when we are faced with persecution, threats or situations that seem impossible. Daniel’s story proves that God will remain faithful to us as we serve Him.

Another point that stands out to me in this story is God handling the men that unjustly accused Daniel. God took care of the situation without Daniel as much as speaking an unkind word, complaining, calling names, or physically harming the men. Daniel simply trusted God to fully protect him.

Do you fully trust God to handle the details of your life?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for remaining faithful to me. Help me to remain steadfast in my faith and to fully trust you to handle the details of my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

Fasting Devotional – Day Fourteen

Person Suffering: Shadrach, Meshach, & Abednego

Written by: Lynn Smith

Thoughts

In today's passage, the Israelites are in the midst of Babylonian captivity, ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar. The King had made an idol of gold and ordered everyone in his kingdom to bow down and worship his golden idol any time they hear the sounds of music. The penalty for disobedience was being thrown into a blazing furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar had taken some of Israel's finest young men and made them his advisors. These included our author, the prophet Daniel, as well as the main characters of this chapter, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The Bible story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is a beloved Old Testament bible story for anyone who ever went to Sunday School or Vacation Bible School and was one of my favorites growing up. To make a long story short – the music played, they didn't bow down, some Babylonian astrologers who were jealous of the power the Jewish captives had gotten, reported them, the king got mad and ordered them thrown into the blazing furnace. That's where our story gets really good! Good old King N summons our three heroes, and they are brought before him. They're given one last chance to bow down before the king's golden image. Did they? Of course not! There are a couple of things I really like about their response to the King: 1) Verse 17 (NIV) – **"IF** we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it." There's no sign of fear in these three! IF we are thrown into the blazing furnace.... IF! IF! To me, what these three are really saying is "King N, we're not even sure God is going to let you throw us in the furnace." IF!!! But if we go in there, our God will deliver us!! Let's learn a lesson here: when Satan is battering you, telling you he's going to destroy you, tell that snake "If you try to destroy me...."

Now we move to verse 18 – they tell the king, even if God doesn't deliver us, we won't serve your gods or your image. The King was so mad at their affront to him that he ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than it had ever been heated. The men putting our three into the fire are killed in the process.

And then what happened? JESUS SHOWED UP!!! Old King N is looking into the fire and thinks he's crazy because he sees four men and not three. The King's advisors confirm there were three men put into the fire and not four. The King orders the three to come out and they do. When they came out, there was no sign whatsoever they had ever been in a fire at all. King N praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and they were promoted.

Challenge

This passage challenges all of us to have faith in God and be brave in the face of any adversity. Any adversity (fire) we face, God is right there with us! He may deliver us from the fire, in the midst of the fire, or walk through it with us so that we come out the other side with a story which will point others to Him. Every scar has a story and God never wastes pain.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to have such faith in you that we will be as brave as these three when we are faced with adversity. Let us be a reflection each day of your love and forgiveness and help us to face each battle armed with the knowledge you are with us every step of the way.

Fasting Devotional – Day Fifteen

Person Suffering: John the Baptist

Written by: Grady Lossie

Thoughts

This passage is about the final moments of John the Baptist. He had spent his life as the one who goes before and prepares the way for the Messiah. John the Baptist did not conform to the societal norms of the day, he was more focused on the greater calling of sharing the Good News of Jesus. Just as the Pharisees rejected Jesus because He showed up as a servant to men instead of a warrior. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus with his life's work being a demonstration of an upside down kingdom where we choose service, forgiveness, and sharing of wealth instead of honor, revenge, or greed.

John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded for his beliefs. He, like so many other followers of Christ, struggled because he was bold and unwavering in his faith. When Jesus hears the news of John the Baptist's death, he tries to separate himself for a time to grieve, but he sees that the need of the people was too great and chose to serve them instead. Jesus and John the Baptist both show us that it is better to serve others than ourselves, regardless of the consequences. Ultimately, the negative consequences of following Jesus and the judgment of unbelievers will stay here on Earth and our rewards will be in Heaven.

Challenge

I think that most of us will face worldly judgment from unbelievers at some point in our lives. It can be from friends, family, coworkers, or people we don't know, but we have to accept that rejection comes with the territory of sharing the gospel. The challenge is to keep sharing, teaching, and showing Christ's love anyway. What are some examples in your life of times that you have been rejected because of your faith? Did you let this experience stop you from sharing your beliefs or did it strengthen your resolve to glorify God in all things?

We are called to show the love of Christ regardless of how it is received, and the way you react when you are rejected should also be a representation of Christ's love.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank you for all the chances that you give me to show your goodness in my life. I humbly ask you to stand with me when I experience rejection or ridicule. I know what I experience here on Earth for my effort's pales in comparison to many others who have suffered greatly for sharing the gospel. Father God, I ask you to soften the hearts and open the ears to the unbelievers that surround me, and I pray that you will give me the resolve to keep sharing your Word. Please give me the wisdom and strength that I need when I find myself in situations where I feel persecuted. I trust that you will turn these circumstances around for your glory and for that Lord, I thank you.

Fasting Devotional – Day Sixteen

Person Suffering: Jesus Christ

Written by: Ryan Clay

Thoughts

As Christians, we are going to suffer. The Bible even tells us that we shouldn't be surprised by this. Though we may not suffer for our faith like people in other parts of the world or like those in biblical times, we nevertheless go through difficult circumstances and seasons. So how do we suffer "well" or in a Godly way? Well, Jesus suffered too, and he is the perfect example of Godly suffering for us. There are a few things I took away from reading and reflecting on Jesus' suffering and death that I think we can learn from.

First, we can be encouraged knowing that Jesus didn't suffer in vain, but rather to fulfill his purpose as the Messiah. Through his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9). He suffered for our sins so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness (1 Peter 2:24). This is good news! In a similar way, God can use our suffering for a greater purpose.

Jesus was obedient to the Father in his suffering. We see this in Gethsemane - Jesus asks his Father that the cup of suffering would be taken away, but he also repeatedly prays "not as I will, but as you will." In Hebrews, it says that Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered. It's not that he was disobedient, but he still had to experience and live out submission to the Father's will. I don't want us to miss that this was hard for Jesus. He knew what he would have to endure and was deeply troubled and sorrowful because of it. He even asked God to take away the suffering that was coming. Being obedient to God's will is hard for us too. I remember earlier this year preparing for an evaluation at work that I had to pass to complete a certification I had spent years working on. I failed the first attempt and was unsure what would happen if I failed again. I prayed for the outcome I wanted, but also that God's will would be done, which was not an easy thing to pray. This does not even compare to what Jesus was going through, but the point is that just like it's difficult for us to submit, it was hard for Jesus too - he can relate.

Finally, Jesus shows us what our response should be in times of suffering - and that is to pray. When he was in the garden, distressed, about to be betrayed and abandoned by his friends and tortured, his response was to pray to the Father. In his commentary from Matthew 26, David Guzik puts it this way - the struggle on the cross was first won in prayer in Gethsemane. Then when he was on the cross, bearing the weight of our sins, he prayed. Jesus demonstrates that when we are suffering, we too should pray. We will be strengthened and will ensure we stay in the Father's will.

Challenge

Here is my challenge for today: know that God can use our suffering for a purpose. Seek God's will and obey. And pray in times of suffering (and in all other times!).

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for the example of Godly suffering we have in Jesus. Thank you that because of his suffering, we have been saved from our sins. Give us strength when we are suffering, help us to submit to your will, and help us to trust that it is good. Amen.

Fasting Devotional – Day Seventeen

Person Suffering: Stephen

Written by: LeChelle Smith

Thoughts

Acts 6-7 was written by Luke to the early Christian community. Luke's purpose was to describe the growing pains of the early church and how the leadership responded to them.

By describing Stephen's arrest and how his speech to the Sanhedrin led to his stoning gives us a sense of his faithfulness and his willingness to let the Holy Spirit give him the boldness and desire to spread the Gospel. By reminding us of Stephen's messages of Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, we can see time and time again where turning our back on God has only led to more suffering. With this, Stephen is encouraging us to not turn our back on God, to be obedient, and spread the message of Jesus Christ no matter what the consequence.

Challenge

Ask yourself are you committed to spreading the message of Jesus? I challenge you to be intentional and bold in your faith to spread the message of Jesus to anyone who is willing to listen. All it takes is the faith of mustard seed. You never know where it may land to take root. My prayer is that one teaching leads to another and then to many. I am reminded of Acts 7:56, "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." It comforts me that even in his suffering, Stephen saw Jesus and only Jesus.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I come before you today in thankfulness for Stephen's suffering. I thank you for his boldness and faithfulness to spreading the Word of Jesus. I ask that you give us the same boldness and strength to do the same. Give us the mouths to speak your word and for others to not only hear but receive you as their Lord and Savior. In Jesus name, Amen.

Fasting Devotional – Day Eighteen

Person Suffering: The Samaritan Woman

Written by: Teresa Gatlin

Thoughts

In John 4, John writes about a Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus. The Samaritan woman went to the well at noontime. Most women would go to the well twice a day to draw water, once in the morning and once in the evening, to avoid the heat of day. This woman, a member of a hated mixed race and known to be living in unrepentant sin was likely trying to avoid the shame that would come by going to the well at the same time as the other women. She was an outcast, socially excluded and marginalized within her community. Yet, Jesus used this suffering, for her good. He met her at this specific time and place where she would not have been if not for her exclusion.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman everything she ever did (John 4:29). He knew her sin and pursued and loved her anyway. Jesus revealed Himself to her, offered her living water and she believed. He redeemed her loneliness and suffering and with a changed heart she had to tell others; "Come and see a man who told me everything I did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" (John 4:29). People came and we see this woman's suffering used for God's glory. John writes in v. 39 "Many Samaritans from the village believed in Jesus because the woman had said, "He told me everything I ever did!" One woman's suffering was used to point to the Messiah, to lead others to believe and have eternal life.

God uses our suffering for our good and His glory too! It is often difficult to see good in seasons of suffering. My family's journey through foster care over the past 3 years has felt like a long season of suffering and surrender. There have been days, weeks, and months where nothing around us felt good, but we hold on to the truth that good exists because God is good and that gives us hope. Romans 5:3-5 says, "We can rejoice too, when we run into problems and trials, because we know that they help us develop endurance, endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation." Trials strengthen us and our Hope!

Trials and suffering are uncomfortable, but they can be a place to encounter God, like the Samaritan woman, or maybe even for the first time for unbelievers. For believers, when we draw closer to God in seasons of suffering and trials, it can be a time of transformation and refinement. I heard a quote by Paul Tripp years ago that has always stuck with me. "God will take you where you haven't intended to go to produce in you what you could not achieve on your own." I'm encouraged to reflect on what God is producing in me in personal suffering.

Challenge

Reflect on what God has produced in you during seasons of suffering. Perhaps you are in a season of suffering now. Pray and reflect on the work God is doing in you in this season.

Prayer

Pray that God will redeem your suffering, produce in you what you could not achieve on your own, and that like the Samaritan woman, your suffering will bring glory to God!

Fasting Devotional – Day Nineteen

Person Suffering: The Blind Man

Written by: Greg Dickerson

Thoughts

At least once in our lives, we've all said or thought, "If I wasn't _____, my life would be different or better. We each have a different story, but I am confident that at some point in our lives, we've wondered why God allowed whatever circumstance in our lives. The man in John 9 likely wondered this every day and probably felt despair growing up, thinking it was his sin or his parent's sin that led to his blindness.

What is amazing is that there is no circumstance you've walked through or are walking through that God didn't see or can't use for His purpose. The question is, are you willing to walk through the discomfort to allow Him to bring His healing? Being a blind beggar, this man was no stranger to rejection and disappointment, and when he heard someone spitting, it wasn't out of the possibility that he would be the target, but he could never imagine what God had planned with that spit. I don't know why Jesus chose to make a spit mud salve, but I am sure many of us would put up our hand and say, "NO, WAY, you're going to put that mud spit in my eyes."

Unfortunately, I think many people miss the blessings and healing from God because they choose to reject Jesus' message, method, or mission for their lives. Often, we try to fix our circumstances with our abilities, resources, or resolve. Still, all that is really needed is a little mud and spit, which costs nothing, but we'll have to surrender everything in us to be healed of our spiritual blindness so that Jesus can be glorified in us.

Challenge

What are you holding on to that you need Jesus to heal, even with His uncomfortable methods? What circumstance has held you in bondage that you need Jesus to unlock so that He can be glorified in your life?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help us SEE our spiritual blindness and need for your healing. Please help us understand that our circumstances do not define us and give us the humility to walk through discomfort to see you glorified. Thank you for meeting us where we are and loving us through all our ups and downs.

Fasting Devotional – Day Twenty

Person Suffering: The Apostles

Written by: Hayley Viter

Thoughts

Reading the book of Acts through the lens of how God uses suffering for our good and for His glory, I saw 50 times the book of Acts mentions the *Holy Spirit*. I saw that the Holy Spirit moved through the apostles because they accepted and said yes to Jesus. However, I also saw that those who chose to let the Holy Spirit fill them, with the purpose of being courageous in sharing the Gospel, experienced intense persecution. But in the suffering and persecution, they grew closer in their relationships to Jesus and developed His character.

The Gospel and the message of building the Kingdom of God did not end with Jesus' ascension to Heaven but was meant to continue in the lives of His followers, starting with the apostles. In Acts 1:8 we read, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* The apostles were distinguished and empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel under a variety of trying circumstances. We read how Peter and John were arrested (Acts 4:1-4), other apostles were put on trial several times for their teachings (Acts 5), Stephen was accused of blasphemy and was therefore stoned to death (Acts 6-7), King Herod killed James, the brother of Jesus (Acts 12:1-2), Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:5-11), and Paul was also frequently thrown in prison and plotted against (Acts 16, 21, 23, 24, 26). But even through the trying circumstances, even through the fear of persecution to come, the apostles refused to stop proclaiming the truth of the Gospel. They refused to just accept the religious and social norms offered to them. They had relationships with God. They were faithful to Him and courageous for Him because of the power of the Holy Spirit living inside them.

Challenge

We have the same ability to have a meaningful relationship with the Lord and access to the Holy Spirit as the apostles did. Which means when the suffering and persecution come in ways of mental and emotional turmoil or job loss or a divorce or deep debt, we can still be faithful and courageous to share what God is doing in our lives because of our relationship with Him and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we continue our fast, I challenge you to surrender whatever trying circumstances you are facing and walk in the power of the Holy Spirit and trust that God will use your suffering for your good and for His glory.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit. We ask for boldness to share the Gospel and boldness to trust you even when we face suffering and persecution. Thank you, Jesus, for taking on our sin and shame and enduring the ultimate experience of suffering so we do not have to. We love you Lord, amen.

Fasting Devotional – Day Twenty-One

Person Suffering: The Early Church

Written by: Evan Christopherson

Thoughts

As we read the passage from Acts 8 today, it's important to remember how the book of Acts began. It recounts the last time that the disciples saw Jesus face to face before he would ascend into Heaven. Jesus' final words to his disciples was His declaration that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It's already a daunting task to spread a message to the ends of the earth, but when you factor in the persecution that they were facing, it can start to look like a Mission Impossible movie with the odds all stacked against them.

There are a couple of things to note though. First, Acts 8 isn't the first time the early church was persecuted. Acts 5 tells a story of the Apostles being arrested. Upon their release, they were beaten and strictly warned to stop speaking about Jesus (Acts 5:40). We might expect their reaction to be fearful or possibly angry. However, it says they left, and they were rejoicing that they were counted worthy of suffering dishonor for the name (v. 41). To the Apostles, suffering and persecution were things to rejoice about, because they were witnesses to the one who suffered in their place first.

Secondly, we must remember a theme that we see throughout scripture. That is, the enemy may mean something for evil, but God works it for good. Persecution may have seemed like a hurdle to overcome in the Apostles mission to spread the Gospel, but it ended up being the very tool that God would use to scatter the gospel bearers to the ends of the earth. Perhaps this is why James tells us to count various trials as joy. God uses the suffering that we face to accomplish his purposes!

Challenge

The odds are that as you read this today, there is something in your life that may not be going the way you would prefer. Use this as an opportunity for your trust in God to grow. To be in a position where you must trust means that things may not be in your control. And that's okay! It turns out that God is big. How can you use the trial that you're facing to help the Kingdom of God grow? Peter was the ring leader of Apostles facing persecution. In his letter, he wrote to the scattered church in 1 Peter 4:12-13, "do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

Prayer

Father, today we thank you for your sovereignty over every situation. Thank you for the example the Apostles left for us as they counted the suffering as joy. You have a long history of taking what the enemy means for evil and turning it for good. Whatever persecution we may face, give us strength and courage to welcome it, knowing that you are using it to accomplish your purposes!

