

Hungering for God

A Biblical Examination of Fasting

Part C- Reasons to Fast

Lesson 1- We Should Fast for God to Raise up Ministry that Will Change the World

The Acts 13:1-4

1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

The situation here was that Saul (Paul) and Barnabas and some of the other leaders in the Church in Antioch were worshiping- ministering to the Lord- and fasting (v. 2). Judging by what happened we may assume that the burden that drove them to fast was this:

"Where do we go from here as a church?"

So they were fasting to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in the direction of their Mission. You could call it Master Planning if you want to. The upshot was more magnificent than any other Master Planning effort the Church has ever undertaken.

They were hungry enough for God's leading that they wanted to say it with the hunger of their bodies and not just the hunger of their hearts. *"We want your leading, O God! O Holy Spirit, what is your will for the mission of this Church?"*

Now what is amazing is that most of the questions we need to answer about our future are *not explicitly* given in the Bible. The ones with clear, Biblical answers don't require a Master Planning team to discern. The questions that press on us are the kind of questions that the leaders in Antioch faced: *"Lord, shall we begin a world mission venture? Should it be now? Should we send some of our own teachers? Should it be Saul or Simeon or Niger or Lucius or Barnabas? Should we send two or three or four? Which way should we send them: by land or by sea? Should we fund them fully or expect them to work for their keep or hope that there will be sons of peace in the towns where they go who will feed them? Should other churches join with us?"* Etc.

Most of the questions that planning teams have to answer are of *that* kind. So where do we get those answers? Do we have anything to learn from the fact that these deeply spiritual early Christians worshiped and fasted and prayed as they sought the leading of the Lord? I think so.

So consider four observations from **The Acts 13:1–4**.

1. This Was after Christ's Coming

This fast was conducted *after* Christ's first Coming. And that is significant to ward off anyone thinking that fasting was only a part of the Old Testament spirituality but not of New Testament spirituality. We have already discussed that issue. And the obvious answer is that Saul and Barnabas and the others in Antioch did not think fasting was the "old wineskin" that needed to be discarded.

2. By a Group Together

This fasting was done by a group together. You see, another important concern about fasting is that Jesus warned against fasting to be seen by men.

Matthew 6:17&18

17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face

18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.

Yet here- Saul and Barnabas do not take Jesus to mean that group fasting is wrong- even though people often know you are fasting when you are doing it as part of a group.

Obviously, the Church leaders at Antioch took Jesus to mean not that we sin if someone knows that we are fasting, but that we sin if our motive for fasting is to be known so that men will applaud us. And that is *why* group fasting has marked God's people all through Biblical and post-Biblical history.

3. An Occasion for the Spirit's Special Guidance

This fasting proved to be an occasion for the Spirit's special guidance. Verses 2&3 say:

2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Now in reporting it this way, Dr. Luke clearly wants us to see a connection between the worship, prayer, and fasting on the one hand, and the decisive guidance of the Holy Spirit on the other.

And so, without evidence to the contrary, I would suggest that this teaches us the value of worship-fasting-prayer in the earnest pursuit of God's Will for our lives and the life of our Church.

4. Changed the Course of History

This fasting changed the course of history. It is almost impossible to overstate the historical importance of this moment in Antioch in the history of the world. Before this word from the Holy Spirit- there seems to have been no organized mission of the Church beyond the eastern seacoast of the Mediterranean. Before this, Paul had made no missionary journeys westward to Asian Minor, Greece, or Rome, or Spain. Before this, Paul had not written any of his letters which were all the result of his missionary travels beginning here.

So this moment of prayer and fasting resulted in a missions movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries and would yield 1.3 billion adherents of the Christian religion today with a Christian witness in virtually every country of the world. And 13 out of the 29 Books of the New Testament were the result of the ministry that was launched in this moment of prayer and fasting.

So I think is it fair to say that God was pleased to make worship and prayer and fasting the launching pad for a mission that would change the course of world history. Is there not a lesson in that for us? It had happened before and it would happen again and again in history.

It Happened in 2Chronicles 20

For example, in **2Chronicles 20** the Moabites and Ammonites and Meunites came against Jehoshaphat the king of Judah. It was a terrifying horde of violent people. What could the people do? What direction should they turn? Verses 3&4 say,

2 Chronicles 20:3&4

3 Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

4 So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.

So there was a great nationwide fast for divine guidance and deliverance. In the midst of that fasting assembly, verses 14&15 say,

2Chronicles 20:14&15

14 Then in the midst of the assembly the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel the son of

Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, the Levite of the sons of Asaph;

15 and he said, "Listen, all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: thus says the Lord to you, 'Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God's.

The next day when the people of Judah went out, they found that the people of Moab and Ammon had destroyed one another, and it took them three days to gather the spoil, there was so much. What looked like a certain defeat and calamity was overnight turned into a stunning triumph. Again the course of history was changed through the fasting of God's people.

It Happened in Britain in 1756

John Wesley tells us in his journal of a similar kind of deliverance in 1756. The king of Britain called for a day of solemn prayer and fasting because of a threatened invasion of the French. Wesley wrote,

“The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquillity.”

Then in a footnote he added later,

"Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted."

It would not be difficult to multiply story after story from the Bible and after the Bible to show that fasting and prayer have changed the course of history. And that this is especially true in the way fasting figures into times of great revival. But let me try to put our focus on fasting and our call to fast in the wider context of what God seems to be doing today, and then what He may be doing with us here at The Covenant of Peace Church.

In our day there has been a remarkable resurgence of worship and prayer. Tens of thousands of congregations around the world are experiencing more vibrant, freer, more engaging worship in the last 20 years. And the prayer movements around the world are unprecedented in number and scope.

But there is not yet a comparable resurgence of the practice of fasting as there has been with worship and prayer. Some have suggested that God may will that all three be in place and that the Church be humbled and hungry with fasting before He blesses us as fully as He means to. It is remarkable how neglected the spiritual practice of fasting is- in the modern Church.

So this is a call for you to consider fasting in order to change the course of history once again in our day.