

## **Great Reasons to Fast**

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Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Isaiah 58:1-12

If you've been here over the last several weeks, you are aware of the fact that we are planning to build a community center on to the front of the building. We are building a community center because we want to extend God's love out to our community. So we are going to be building a 2-story, 45,000 sq. ft. building that will be a home for a variety of services and programs. We are planning to do job training for people. We are planning to offer a free medical clinic. We want to do a free legal clinic. We want to expand our after school program, offer dance classes, art classes, expand our sports program. We are going to have a daycare center and recovery ministries.

We know that the area surrounding our church is not the highest need area of Columbus. But we also know that about 40% of the homes in our immediate area are headed by single parents and we feel an obligation to care for our immediate neighborhood. We are going to continue to reach into higher need areas of our city via our ministry called Fruit of the Vine. And we are going to continue to run our free medical clinic and food pantry from our 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue location.

In addition, if you've been here, you've heard me speak about the desire of this church to radically expand our involvement in world missions. Over the next 4-5 years we hope to raise up three full teams from this church to be sent out to different unreached peoples in Asia and in Africa.

We've been holding what we call Personal Contact meetings. These are informational meetings from Monday to Friday evening here at the church at 7:30 p.m. If you are part of a small group, your group will be invited to attend on one evening over the next month. Try to go with your small group on the evening that your group is invited. Our strong preference would be that if you are married you would go as a married couple. But if you both can't go on the same night, that is OK. Pick one night and make plans to attend.

For those of you who are not connected to a small group, or who can't go on the night you are invited, just pick one of the other available nights from now until the end of February and go. We really want every single person who is attached to this church to go to one of the informational meetings in the next month.

This community center and our attention to world missions may be the most important undertaking we've ever been involved in as a church. You need to know what is going on because this will affect the destiny of this church, I believe, over the next several decades in ways that we can't even fathom right now. I believe that God is going to do something great in our community and in

our world, but also inside of us as a result of us choosing to give ourselves away to our city and to our world.

Now, because of the enormity of this project and the number of needs that we have, what I would like you to do is to pull out a bulletin insert that is titled “I am committed to pray and fast on...” It is a little postcard. As a leadership team, we have decided to engage this church in a 40-day process of prayer and fasting.

The cards have been randomly handed out. What I am asking you to do is to commit to fast for one of the days on your card. If you wish to fast for more days, you can check more boxes. I recognize that for some of you the week that you’ve been handed may be a very bad week. You may be out of town on business or your may have your mother-in-law in. So you can put down an alternative date or dates in the next month if you wish, and other things you wish to pray for.

And then, on the back of the card, write your name and address and put those cards in the bin that is located next to each communion cart as you leave the sanctuary. Just drop the cards in. There is also a little paper on fasting that you can pick up. It contains excerpts from *The Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster.

Now, I realize fasting is not a popular subject for one very simple reason: We love to eat!

On the one hand, every other commercial on TV is selling us food. Have you see any of the ads for Chipotle? Listen to these ads.

- Burrito or body pillow?
- Burritos so big they should be called burros.
- Burritos the size of speed bumps.
- Our burritos come in three sizes: large, large, and did we mention large?
- Burrito or pommel horse

Every where you look on TV you are going to see dancing M&Ms and elves selling Keebler Cookies, and Jared telling us how he lost over 100 pounds by eating Subway sandwiches three times a day.

So on the one hand, food is pitched to us on every other page in our magazines and on every other billboard and on TV and radio advertisements. How many cooking shows are there? How many cook books and cooking magazines are available now?

On the other hand, every magazine and book is selling us a diet. So we spend billions and billions of dollars dieting from our over-consumption of food. In the history of the world, there has never been a culture more obsessed with food,

eating, and stimulating appetites, and contradictorily, dieting, than America right now. It is any wonder that we have more eating disorders during this period of time, than has ever existed in the history of the world?

Fasting takes deadly aim at one of the primary idols in America – food! Go into any office building and into the lunchroom. There will be plates of food – cookies and candy. People have stashes of food in their desks, food in their purses, and even scraps of food in the backseat of their cars, in case we can't get to a drive-through quick enough. People have microwaves and refrigerators in their bedrooms. That way they don't have to actually climb the stairs and risk burning calories to get more food. Why do most of us not like to hear about fasting? Because we're obsessed with food.

Now, let me tell you what I mean by fasting. There are lots of different kinds of fasts and we see these in the Bible. There is what one might call "the normal fast," which means going without food for a definite period of time during which you ingest only liquids like water or juice. When we say you ingest liquids, we mean that you don't puree your steak or blend a chocolate cake and say, "Well, I'm not eating anything solid during the fast. I'm just drinking this chocolate cake." The normal fast is a fast in which you go without solid food and only take in water or juice for a day, 3 days, a week, a month, or 40 days.

Then there is the partial fast. A partial fast means that you choose to skip certain meals. Maybe, you say for a week I'm not going to eat lunch, or I'm going to cut out eating breakfast and lunch for a week. Perhaps you cut out certain kinds of food. Partial fasting might mean you're going to cut out caffeine because you are totally addicted. I hear the groans now! Or you might decide to cut out sugar, or meat.

Certainly, for some people fasting can be dangerous and is medically unwise. If you have certain health problems, or are on certain kinds of medications, it would be life threatening to fast. People with diabetes would not be wise to fast.

Biblically, there are lots of things that one can fast from beyond food, although today I am primarily going to be talking about food. In 1 Cor. 7:5, the Bible speaks of married couples abstaining from sexual intimacy, by mutual consent, so they can pray. Couples can refrain from romantic intimacy for a brief period of time. You might choose for a week or a month to fast from the TV. Cut the cable and put the TV in your closet. You may choose to fast from videos or movies. For example, during this 40-day fast, you may choose to go on an entertainment fast, because you see that you are obsessed by, dominated by or drenched with entertainment. Even if you aren't drenched or obsessed, you might want to take some of that time, which would normally be spent watching movies or TV, and pray and read your Bible.

You might choose to fast from shopping for new clothes, or CD shopping, or window-shopping. You might fast from using your credit card.

Why would anyone fast? Why would I give up food that I like so much? Why be hungry, which I dislike very much? Why fast from food?

Let me share with you what is not a reason to fast. In our body-obsessed culture, I need to say at the front end that the reason the Bible encourages fasting, and that we as a church are going to be engaged in a fast, is not for the purpose of having all of us lose weight, or to have a harder body, or to have a more sexy figure. I have to say that because that is the deep motive for fasting in our body-obsessed, personally vain culture.

The primary purpose for fasting is to gain more of God. As Richard Foster puts it, we fast in order to feast on God. You may come to the recognition in your life that every pore of your being is stuffed full of the world. You are just stuffed with entertainment and food and possessions and anxieties. And as a result of being stuffed to the brim, you feel dull to the voice of God. You feel spiritually flabby and lazy. Internally, you do not feel spiritually sharp and alive. You don't only feel dull to the voice of God, but dull to the power of God and dull to God's will and purpose for your life.

So, in order to create a little more room for God, and to unhook from the world, you deliberately abstain from things that are making you dull – TV, listening to the radio in your car, videos, shopping, sex, food. We fast in order to feast upon God. I've called today's talk, "Great Reason to Fast." Let's pray.

Isaiah 58:1-5

## SLIDE

Isa 58:1 "Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion  
and to the house of Jacob their sins.

Isa 58:2 For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.

Isa 58:3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.

Isa 58:4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Isa 58:5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for a man to humble himself?  
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?



If you were to break down this text, you might say that vv. 1-5 might be subtitled, “Fasting When It Is Wrong,” and vv. 6-12 might be subtitled “Fasting When It Is Right.” Vv. 1-5 bad reasons to fast and vv. 6-12 great reasons to fast.

A major problem in vv. 1-5 is religion without reality – what I have called for years, “veneer spirituality.” You know what veneer is? You have a desk or table that has an oak veneer surface. It looks really good. But if you scratch it 2mm deep, you discover that underneath the veneer is particle board. That is what Isaiah is accusing the people of in Chapter 58. He is saying they are going through the motions of religion, but it is all pretense, it is all surface, it is all appearance. Their so-called faith doesn’t penetrate to their hearts or to their actions. V. 2:

#### SLIDE

Isa 58:2 For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.  
They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.

The words in v. 2 are that they seem eager. He says that twice. He also uses the phrase “as if.” As if they were a nation that does what is right. The key words are seem – and they are not truly eager to know God’s way, they merely appeared to be eager. They are not a nation that does what is right, but they pretend to be.

Alan Wolfe is a secular Jewish professor of American Politics and Public Policy at Boston College. A couple of years ago he wrote a book titled "The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith." What Wolfe said essentially was that secular America had nothing to fear from evangelical Christians. Wolfe comforts his fellow secularists. He says: "I understand that you are afraid of evangelicals because of their overt religiosity. You see them praying over their food in restaurants and carrying Bibles, and talking about voting the way Jesus instructed them to vote. But as secularists, we have nothing to fear from evangelicals. Despite all of their talk about being different and distinct, evangelical churches are shot through with American pop psychology and Oprah-style spirituality. Yes, they are a little annoying with all of their Jesus talk. But don't worry," here is the message: "They don't mean it!"

I read Wolfe's book and I said: What an indictment. Here are all these Christians who talk about their faith a lot and about how they are citizens of another kingdom and how they have given their whole lives to Christ, but don't worry, America, they don't mean it.

That is what the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, is accusing the Jews of. Yes, I know you have a big show of religion and a big show of fasting. But the pagans have nothing to fear from you. You don't mean it.

May I ask those of you who do consider yourselves to be Christian an affectionate question? For all your talk about Jesus Christ changing your life, do you mean it? What is the last thing in your life that you would say Christ has really changed about you? Are you considerably less anxious this year than last year because you are surrendering your life over to Christ? Would you say that you are drawing your identity from what Christ says about you, that you are a child of God, that you are God's son or daughter? Or do you still find yourself fundamentally performance-oriented and that you only feel really good about yourself when you have achieved something that is important to you, when you have a boyfriend or girlfriend, when you've gotten a raise, when you've exercised a certain amount of time, or lost a certain amount of weight, been praised by someone at your job or in the church?

Again, I ask those of you who consider yourselves to be Christians, for all your talk about Jesus, would this secular writer, Alan Wolfe, be correct about you or the other Christians you know when he says you don't really mean it?

For example, how has your relationship with Christ affected your view of people of a different race than you? A lot? A little? Not at all? Do you still find yourself bristling when you see couples together who are different races? Do you attribute certain attitudes to people who are of a different race than you, even when you don't know that person?

Has your relationship with Christ affected your approach to conflict? Are you more quick to forgive than you used to be? Less judgmental? Do you find it easier to give people the benefit of the doubt?

Has your relationship with Christ affected your approach to money? We are in the middle of a giving campaign and we are talking about sacrificially giving away significant sums of money to our community and our world via world missions. Do you find yourself internally saying, “Yes, this is right! This resonates inside of me.”

When my wife, Marlene, was in high school, she attended a Pentecostal church. Every week an older couple would come to church and lift their hands to God and worship him fervently. At a certain time in the service, the man would stand and give a prophetic word. Sometimes his wife would speak out loud in tongues. There was a great show of spirituality. It seemed that this was a couple who were close to God. And then they would leave church and drive home in separate cars. Marlene knew from others in the family that they were constantly fighting. They had a horrible marriage. But when they entered the church building, there was this great show of religion.

Fasting is wrong when it is a lot of religion. God hates religious form without substance. Prophets regularly condemn hype and show and pomp. Jesus takes aim at pharisaical religion. He tells us that he hates veneer spirituality. What

Jesus wants inside of each of us, friends, is authenticity. He wants our hearts and behavior to match our words. He wants us to be the real thing through and through. He wants genuineness.

One of the highest values of this church is genuineness. Our church is committed to not put on a show at our worship services. We reject the glitz, hype, and spiritual talk that are no real indicator of where a person stands with God.

When is fasting wrong? When it is a way to earn God's favor. Religion 2700 years ago in Isaiah's day, and religion today, is marked by the attitude that if I do some religious practice, pray for a certain amount of time, read my bible every morning, fast a certain amount of time, then I will be accepted by God. Martin Luther, the great father of the Protestant Reformation, taught that religion is the default mode of the sinful heart.

Religion – our anxious attempt to earn God's favor - is always going to produce people who are angry and contentious and divisive. Vv. 3-4,

#### SLIDE

Isa 58:3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please

and exploit all your workers.

Isa 58:4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Whenever you see a church that is filled with judgment and division and contentiousness, guaranteed, you will find at the foundation a lack of grace and a great deal of religion.

You see, when you base your acceptance with God upon your performance, then you will always look with disdain on someone else that is not performing to your particular standards. This was Jesus' accusation against the Pharisees in this parable of the prodigal son. He talks about an older brother. This older brother was anxiously serving his father, trying to gain his father's acceptance, rather than relying on his father's love for him. He thought the reason why he deserved favor from his father was because of his own moral efforts. He became judgmental and angry and insecure. That is the way we become when we rely on our own efforts. We become angry, judgmental, mechanical and insecure. We constantly try to bolster our own sense of worthiness by putting other people down.

This is the reason, friends that we engage in so much gossip and slander. It is the performance oriented person who is basing their worth on what they do who will always disdain other people and be guilty of gossip and slander. We lift

ourselves up by putting other people down. A person who is truly secure in God's love will approach other people with grace and acceptance. You can tell if you have really received grace because you regularly show grace to other people who don't maintain as high a standard as you do.

Let me ask you, friend, are you a gracious person? Do you say about yourself the reason why I might be doing well is because almighty God and his love busted in on me. Are you living from a place of reliance upon the shoulder of God?

A basic performance-orientation is what most non-Christians think they are being invited into when someone encourages them to accept Christ. What most non-Christians think Christianity is that they are being invited to get religion and to try to live better according to the example of Christ. Let me say a word to those of you who are not yet Christians. Acceptance by God and the forgiveness of your sins is a gift that God freely gives without regard to how good you are or how hard you try to be good. The reason Christ suffered and died on a cross was so that the entire debt that you and I owe to God would be fully paid. When you simply trust and rest on the person of Jesus and his work on the cross, rather than on your own activity, God embraces you and declares you to be his son or daughter. And because you are relying on the goodness and activity of someone else, namely Christ, you will not become a self-righteous pain in the neck, like some religious people you know.

Don't keep yourself from resting on Christ because you fear that you will become a person you don't like. I will tell you, if you truly rest on Christ and rely on Christ, you are going to become a person you like a whole lot more than the person you are right now. If you trust in Christ and receive Christ's love for you, you will become more loving. You will become more gracious. You will become more accepting, welcoming and forgiving. You will become more honest. You will become more authentic, more genuine because you don't have to perform or appear to perform in order to feel loved. You will be confident that you are loved simply because God is love.

Well, when is fasting right? Martin Luther, who I quoted earlier, taught that it was not Christ's intention to reject fasting. It was his intention to restore proper fasting and that is Isaiah the prophet's purpose as well. Isaiah is not rejecting fasting. He just wants to restore proper fasting. Fasting is right when it is designed to spread freedom. v. 6,

#### SLIDE

Isa 58:6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?"

In verse 6 there are four terms that are used as synonyms for setting people free. Isaiah speaks of loosing the chains of injustice; untying the cords of the yoke;



setting the oppressed free; and, breaking every yoke. The gospel is not just a message of forgiveness, trust in Christ and you will have your sins forgiven. The gospel is also a message of freedom. It is a message of liberation. Trust in Christ and you will be set free from everything that enslaves you. The kingdom of God is all about people who have been set free spreading the message of freedom to others.

Nicholas Kristof is a New York Times columnist and recently wrote a fascinating editorial called “Liberals Would Do Well To Link Up With Christian Conservatives’ Good Works.” What Kristof writes is this:

*One of the most conservative, religious, fascinating, and in many ways, admirable politicians in America today is Sam Brownback, the Senator from Kansas, who is a leader of the Christian Right.*

*Sen. Brownback is to the right of Attila the Hun. I disagree with him on just about every major issue. But Christians like Brownback are increasingly engaged in humanitarian causes abroad, thus creating a lot of opportunities for common ground between left and right on issues we all care about. Take sex trafficking. It was Brownback and other Christians who led the fight to pass landmark legislation in the year 2000 to battle sex slavery around the world. Leadership on the issue has passed to Christians and the Bush Administration.*

*Or Darfur. Christians have been jumping up and down about Sudan for years because of its oppression of Christians. So when Sudan's government launched its genocide in the Darfur region, Democrats were slow to speak up, perhaps perceiving it as a conservative issue. Then there is North Korea. Democrats have properly lambasted Bush for his disastrous approach to North Korea, which has reacted to his policy by turning into a nuclear arms assembly line. But it has been Brownback and other Christians who have turned the heat on North Korea's human rights record and laid the groundwork for more radio broadcast to undermine the regime there. He is working with liberals to press for immigration reform, prison reform, increased funds for AIDS and malaria, construction of an African-American history museum, and even an apology to American Indians. The other day Brownback told me insistently about his trip to Northern Uganda and urged me to write about brutalities there. I was disoriented. I am usually the one trying to get people to pay attention to oppressed people in remote places. Why is the conservative Kansas Senator traveling to the wilds of Uganda? Listen to Sen. Brownback,*

*"I had a health issue a few years back and it really made my faith real," he said, referring to a bout with cancer. "It made me think the things that the Lord would want done in this world, let's do. His heart is with the down-trodden, so let's help them."*

See, the Christian faith, when it has been really practiced by genuine Christians is not just a message of cheap forgiveness, get your card punched and you get to go to heaven, next. The Christian message, when it is really practiced results in freedom and liberation for people who are oppressed. Virtually every liberation movement in the last two centuries has had Christians at the forefront, whether we are talking about the civil rights movement that emerged in Southern churches, or the emancipation of women in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the emancipation of slaves and the condemnation of slavery worldwide. It is Christians who have led the charge.

Why are we building a community center? In part, it is to spread freedom to this community. What if, as part of the community center, we have groups set up to free people from addictions? We have various kinds of recovery groups operating within the church now. We have groups in our church designed to offer freedom for people who are addicted to various substances, for men who suffer from sexual addictions, for women who have various eating disorders, for people with various anger issues. What if we had groups for not only people in the church, but also for people in our community? What if we demonstrated that the kingdom of God actually has power over everything that holds people in our community in bondage? That the kingdom of God is not just good ideas, but it is the power of God. What, if as part of the community center, we did do vocational training? Or some of our business folks actually started businesses that the unemployed could work in and we did liberate people from bondage to poverty?

What if we offered free counseling and adoption help for unwed mothers to set women free from the trap of abortion?

V. 6 has not only a social dimension, but also a personal dimension.

Many people are trapped by what Hebrews 12 calls the sin that so easily entangles. The KJV calls it the besetting sins. That's worked itself into the popular Christian terminology – besetting sins. It is what we would call today addictive behavior or compulsive behavior. There are many people who are trapped by addiction, or compulsions. When Hebrews 12 talks about the sin that entangles, its not so much the occasional lapses or the momentary failures. It is talking about habitual behaviors. It is something that regularly enslaves us, whether the habitual behavior is an attitude, a behavior, a practice, or a way of thinking. The bondage that you are in makes you feel like your will in a certain area has been taken away. One person put it this way, "I feel as though I'm forced to play a game where I always lose, but I can't quit playing."

Are any of you involved in playing a game where every time you play that game, you always lose, but you are compulsively addicted to playing that losing game? Alcoholics Anonymous defines insane behavior as doing the same behavior over and over and over and expecting a different result each time. This particular behavior has always brought me shame; it has always caused guilt. It never works, but yet I'll try again.

What are we talking about by bondage? We are talking about slavery to alcohol, slavery to drugs, to homosexual relations, to pornography, to smoking. We are talking about slavery and bondage to lying, where you repeatedly lie every time you are cornered. Bondage to anger, self-pity, masturbation, adultery or eating. You try, but you simply can't break control. You don't want to, but you feel like you can't help it. The same lies in those times of besetting sins, those habitual sins that say you are powerless, you are trapped, and you can't break free. It doesn't matter that the Bible says that you are dead to sin. It's not true in your life.

Isaiah is saying, in times of bondage, "Have you considered fasting?" There's a story in the New Testament where the disciples in Mark 9 are trying to chase a demon out of a boy. They can't. Jesus goes ahead and casts the demon out, delivers the boy, and the disciples ask, "Why couldn't we do it?" Jesus says, "this kind only comes out by prayer" (Mark 9:29). There are some early manuscripts, copies of the original gospel of Mark that add the words, "and fasting." It is quite clear that Mark didn't originally write that "this kind only comes out by prayer and fasting." But the early church made an addition to Mark's manuscript because the early church understood that there was a spiritual principle that fasting breaks bondages.

There is a spiritual principle that the early church was aware of. When you fast, you are taking mastery over your physical appetites. This leads to mastery over your emotional and spiritual appetites. You know when you take control of something as basic as eating, you develop strength to take control over other areas of your life. Let me work this out for you because I really believe fasting is one way a person can regain control of an out-of-control life.

See the issue of bondage is, what will control you? Your appetites? Sex? Drink? Cigarettes? Anger? Pornography? Shopping? People Pleasing? Popularity? The issue of bondage is what will control you, your appetites or Jesus Christ? Right now you may say something or someone other than Jesus Christ is currently controlling you. Now what is going on in fasting is that you are wrestling for the control of your will again.

Let me put it this way. Your will, as a result of a repeated sin, has gotten eroded and needs to be strengthened again. It needs to be shored up. By saying no to your appetite, what the Bible calls self-denial, or crucifying the flesh, you are basically saying “no” to what you want, saying “no” to what you’ve given yourself to over and over again. When you say “no” to yourself in the area of food, you will get restored to a place of health. Your will can get restored in other areas so that you can say “yes” to Christ and Christ’s mastery over your sex life, over your anger, over your shopping, or over your self-pity. As you surrender control of your physical appetite, you open the door for the release of Christ’s power over

other areas of your life. We fast to feast on God and his power to break bondages.

When is fasting right? When it puts your in touch with other people's suffering.

V. 7, 10,

#### SLIDE

Isa 58:7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Isa 58:10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

You know, the Hebrew word for fasting literally means to afflict one's self or to afflict one's soul. But Isaiah condemns self-affliction that terminates entirely on the self. V. 5,

#### SLIDE

Isa 58:5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for a man to humble himself?  
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

What Isaiah is saying is use your fasting and the suffering you experience from fasting not only to humble yourself, but to put you more in touch with the suffering of other people. Let me make this more plain.

You know, pain has two very different results in our lives. On the one hand, if you are in pain, if you have severe back pain, or are suffering emotionally as the result of the death of someone you love, or you are experiencing the pain of a broken relationship, or you've experienced the pain of betrayal, trauma, assault or divorce, that pain can make you very self-focused. Lots of times when we are in pain, the only thing we are able to think about is our own suffering and the relief of our own suffering. The all-consuming thought is how can I feel better? How can I experience some pain relief?

Maybe you have seen this in your own life, or you are seeing it right now in your life. Your pain has pushed you into a very self-focused season. Your pain has pushed you into a very self-focused set of coping behaviors. You've become withdrawn. You've stopped connecting with others. Or you are abusing substances, or you are dulling your pain by throwing yourself into work or sexual activity. You've adopted some type of coping mechanism to alleviate your pain. Pain can have the effect of shrinking your heart.

But pain can have a very different effect. It can actually stretch your heart. Pain can put you more in touch with the pain of others. Your own suffering can make



you more empathetic towards others who suffer. Some of the best caregivers have, themselves, suffered similarly.

Part of our confidence that God understands our suffering and sympathizes with us in our weakness springs from the fact that God himself has suffered in Christ. We read in Hebrews 2:18,

**SLIDE**

Heb 2:18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

And in Hebrews 4:15, we read:

**SLIDE**

Heb 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin

Heb 4:16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

God, in Christ, suffered. And so we are confident that he can help us.

The apostle Paul talks about the heart enlarging impact of suffering in his own life in 2 Cor. 1. We read these words in vv. 3—6,

**SLIDE**

2Co 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,

2Co 1:4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

2Co 1:5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

2Co 1:6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

Let me ask you a question. What has pain done to your heart? Have you become more brittle, more self-focused, or have you become more tender and welcoming as a result of suffering? What do you see in your life? Has the fact that you failed in some area made you more kind and gracious towards others who have failed? Has the fact that you have suffered a miscarriage or lost a child, or you had cancer, or you've been through a divorce, or you were unemployed for a long time, or you survived abuse – has it made you more tender toward others?

Isaiah is saying essentially that when you fast, when you voluntarily take on pain, allow the fast to expand your heart towards others who are suffering. Don't just spend your fast on yourself, thinking about how hungry you are, or how much you personally need. Allow the hunger pangs to cause you to enter the suffering of hungry people around the world. Allow your hunger pangs to make you feel tender towards others who are suffering in this world. Allow your fasting to deepen your identity with others who are in pain and to strengthen your intercession.

Who is in pain? Those without relationships are in pain. Let me tell you another reason we are building this community center. We are building it to set people

free. But we are building a community center to offer community to those who have no community – divorced people, single parents, elderly, young people coming from struggling families. My prayer is that we would offer community to one major group that has no community and that is the foreign born in Franklin County.

Do you know, we don't have to go far to be involved in world missions. The world is moving to America urban areas. There are 78 languages spoken in Columbus Public Schools. The number one foreign language in Columbus Public Schools is Somali. Number 2 is Spanish. Do you know what number 3 is? Khmer, the Cambodian language. Number 4 is Laotian.

- There are nearly a hundred thousand foreign-born citizens in Franklin County alone.
- The Somali Community Association estimate 27,000 Somalis live in Franklin County.
- Nearly 90,000 people in Franklin County speak a language at home other than English.
- 27,000 speak Spanish at home.
- 2500 speak Russian
- 7000 speak Chinese
- 10,000 households in our community are considered linguistically isolated – no one over 14 speaks English very well.

- There are 130 countries represented by OSU students

The world is coming here.

We afflict ourselves through fasting so that we can connect with the suffering of people in our city and around our world. I want you to see a video from Damas, a Vineyard pastor in N'Dola, Zambia.

N'Dola is a city of about 600,000 people in the copper belt region of Zambia. Zambia is in the southern part of central Africa. Zambia has been hit very hard by the AIDS crisis and is estimated to have over 600,000 orphans. The Vineyards we are in relationship within N'Dola have become real friends - worshipping, serving and fellowshiping with each other for the last 4 years.

In February 2001 we sent our first team to Africa and we spent time with Damas, his wife Glenda, and the N'Dola Vineyard. About 3 years ago, through FOTV and with support from Vineyard Kids, we began a ministry partnership with the N'Dola Vineyard that Damas oversees in outreach to about 50 AIDS orphans in the village of Twapia. The children receive food, children's ministry, busing to church and the means to go to school, (books, uniforms, school supplies, shoes, and a backpack).

Damas' church has planted a church in the inner city of N'Dola and, under his supervision, we have now also partnered with Jones Kasonso, the pastor of this new church plant. About a year ago, through Joshua House and FOTV, we began partnering with Damas in outreach to pregnant HIV+ Moms and their children in an outreach that is called "Twatotella". 15 Moms and their 16 children receive medicine, nutritional support and the empowering love of Christ.

VIDEO – Damas

Finally, fasting is right when it is designed to obtain wisdom and guidance from God. Vv. 10, 11:

#### SLIDE

Isa 58:10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

Isa 58:11 The LORD will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

Throughout church history, Christians have taken time to fast when they needed clear direction and guidance from God.

In Acts 13 it says,

## SLIDE

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers; Barnabas and Simeon, called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene and Manean, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

A good time to fast is when you're contemplating a major directional change. For example, you are contemplating getting married, or moving to another city, or shifting your career, or choosing a business partner, or significantly reorienting ministry, or appointing new leaders, or sending our missionaries. Major directional change in your life demands wisdom from God. So many of the blunders and mistakes people made in the Bible are the result of not seeking God's wisdom first. Read through the Bible and what you will repeatedly see is that people do what is right in their own eyes and they stumble and fall instead of seeking wisdom from God. So Samson hooked up with a young babe, Delilah, because she looked good. Seemed like a good relationship. It turned out to be disastrous. Joshua is deceived by the Gibeonites. They seemed like they were telling the truth. Everything seemed good. But he was lied to. He didn't seek God first. David numbered the people of Israel. It seemed like a good idea. God hated it.

Think about this principle in your own life. Friend, how many of you have made unfortunate decisions that resulted sometimes in years of unhappiness because you did not seek the wisdom of God first? You made a very unfortunate choice in marriage or in romance, or you made a terrible financial investment, or picked

the absolutely wrong business partner, or joined the wrong company, or firm, or gave yourself to the wrong church because you didn't seek God's wisdom. How many churches in America have laid their hands on the wrong people because they didn't do what the apostles did – fast and pray for wisdom from above.

We don't know the future and we can't see below the surface. We are people easily deceived. Why do you fast when you need wisdom? Now, how does that wisdom come? Very often during a fast, God shifts our desires. By that, I mean that he purifies our hearts. When a person fasts and prays, seeking God for wisdom, God will often shift their hearts and begin to deal with issues that are clouding their judgments and preventing them from making good decisions. For example, a typically bad reason why people get married is that they don't like living at home. I can't tell you how many couples I talk with who got married young and who said, "Well, to be honest, I think one of the primary reasons I decided to get married was because I didn't want to stay at home. I didn't want to be with my mom or dad, and this person was available." When you fast and pray before you make the decision to get married, God will bring that to the surface. Is that a good reason to get married?

Or it may be that your thinking is being clouded by greed. As you pray and fast about accepting a job, God may show you the real reason you are going after this job or moving from one city to another is because they are offering more money. But it is not as if you think the Kingdom of God is going to be promoted

that way, or that it is going to be better for your family, or better for you spiritually. You are just being offered more money.

God may reveal to you as you fast and pray that the reason you are moving churches is because you are unwilling to engage in the hard work of reconciling a relationship. Or maybe you are afraid. The reason why you are not changing ministry or not doing something God wants you to do is that you are afraid of what everybody is going to think and especially if you've been in a position for a long time, you may be afraid.

One thing that I would like to ask you to do at the time you fast is to ask God what would he have you give. And if you are married, what you and your husband or wife, should give in this giving campaign. See, there are two ways for you to determine what you are to give to build this dream of a community center and to grow missions in this church. One way for you to determine what you are going to give is to take a look at your checking account, consider your expenses, and your future desires – you want to purchase a car, you want to fix up your house, you want to go on vacation – figure up your income, deduct your expenses, and then having taken a look at your resources, make a decision regarding what you can afford to give.

But I would like to encourage you to take a very different approach. The approach to giving that I would like to suggest is that on the appointed time you



are fasting, you ask God what he would have you give. That you really seek the face of God individually and, if you are married, as a couple. Say to God: “God, what part would you have me or us play in this?” God promises wisdom and he will often show us, particularly if we are asking about money, issues of greed in our heart, fear, control, places where we don’t trust him.

The bottom line friend, is that when we fast and pray, God will often show us our motives. He’ll show us his heart, so we are able to get rid of the impurities and say, “O God, that is a terrible reason to make that decision.” Sometimes God, in the process of fasting and praying, will actually change your desires. Something at the beginning of your fast seems really desirable – that job is so attractive, that marriage prospect is just what I want, that ministry position that has opened up in Texas is where I need to go, but during fasting, God changes our heart and begins to speak to us. God may speak to you by drawing your attention to a particular text in the Bible.

One of the things I recommend during a fast, along with praying, is to take in massive doses of the Word of God, the Bible. Let the Bible be bread for your soul when you are not eating bread. Let the Bible be for you meat and drink when you are not eating and drinking.

So often God speaks to us by taking a phrase or a word from the pages of the Bible and just running us through like a spear in the chest. I recommend if you

are seeking God for wisdom, each day you take an hour and read 4 or 5 chapters of the Bible and say, "God, speak to your servant's heart. Take the words from this book and let me see something that will encourage me in this new direction." God may speak by way of a very vivid impression, a vision, or a dream. Many people who have fasted a lot more than I have in my life say that the times of greatest clarity in their relationship with God is during a season of fasting. God may speak to you prophetically. He may stir up somebody else to come along with a word that you need.

## **Great Reasons to Fast**

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Rich Nathan

January 29-30, 2005

Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Isaiah 58:1-12

- I. Wrong Reasons To Fast (Is. 58:1-5)
  - A. Fasting Is Wrong When It Is Designed To Give Us The Appearance Of Spirituality (Is. 58:2)
  - B. Fasting Is Wrong When It Is Designed To Earn God's Favor (Is. 58:3-4)
- II. Great Reasons To Fast (Is. 58:6-12)
  - A. Fasting Is Right When It Is Designed To Bring Freedom (Is. 58:6)
  - B. Fasting Is Right When It Is Designed To Connect Us With People Who Are Suffering (Is. 58:7, 10)
  - C. Fasting Is Right When It Is Designed To Gain Wisdom And Guidance From God (Is. 58:10, 11)