

REBUILDING, REPENTANCE, *and* REVIVAL

September 2017 Fast
Ezra 8-9



southlands
church

WHY DO WE FAST?

Fasting has long been a powerful component in the life of Christian worship. Jesus began his public ministry after 40 days of prayer and fasting in the wilderness. He spoke of fasting in the Gospels (Matt. 6:16-18; 9:14-15) and the early church practiced it (Acts 9:9, 13:2, 14:23). Fasting has been a part of the Southlands story too, and many significant moments of direction and vision for the church have come directly out of church-wide fasts.

But what is fasting *for*? Is it just some sort of sanctified diet? In short, fasting is for mission. More specifically, it's a practice of *formation* that equips us for *mission*.

1. The physical hunger we feel in a fast intensifies our longings for Jesus. In our pain and discomfort we desperately seek God, cry out to him. We recognize more clearly our dependence on God and our hunger and thirst for more of his presence.
2. The combination of prayer and fasting (the two always goes together!) helps remove distractions and allows us to focus on Jesus. The time we don't spend eating is more time we can spend in silence, prayer, listening to God. In our busy lives, fasting helps us create space to meditate on God's Word and allow the Holy Spirit to speak.
3. All of this is not just for our own spiritual enrichment, but for our missional effectiveness. It is significant that just prior to beginning his public ministry, Jesus fasted. The 40 days in the wilderness was for Jesus a preparatory time, a season of struggle and temptation and isolation (similar to the 40 day period the Israelites spent in the wilderness prior to entering the Promised Land), and yet one that clearly catalyzed his forward momentum in mission. Likewise, we see in Acts 13:1-3, this clear connection between fasting and mission. The Holy Spirit spoke to the Antioch church while they were worshipping and fasting. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned and sent off on mission immediately after fasting and praying.
4. We are fasting because we want Southlands, as a church but also as individuals, to be formed for mission. The purpose of wilderness, for Israel and for us, is that we be refined and

prepared, as a set-part people, to bring the blessing of God to all nations.

TIPS FOR FASTING

- If this is your first fast, ease into it. Don't feel the pressure to go without food for all three days. Start with fasting a meal a day, then gradually build up to a full day.
- An intermediate fast would be what is known as a "Daniel Fast" this is where you abstain from choice food, meat, and wine and only eat vegetables and drink water.
- If you are fasting from food, we typically encourage a juice fast which would include fruit juice and soup/broth and water.
- We only recommend a full water only fast if you have experience fasting and/or participated in one of the these other versions before.
- The idea behind fasting is to abstain from a routine habit/practice for the sake of spiritual hunger. You may not be able to fast from food due to health reasons, etc. so consider abstaining from social media, television, or any other habitual practice in your day that you can set aside for the sake of focused prayer.
- The fast begins after dinner on Sunday night. Don't eat a massive, greasy meal as your last meal. You'll regret it!
- At some point during each day of the fast, find a 30-minute time slot (at least) to read that day's devotional. Ideally this is in a quiet, distraction-free place where you can have uninterrupted time. Bring your juice and ask Jesus to be your nourishment! Feasting on the word of God will do wonders for a growling stomach.
- On each day there will be a theme and a passage of Scripture to contemplate. The idea is to read and meditate on the Scripture for a good 15 minutes, and then spend 15 (or more) minutes in prayer.
- The meditation part is key. It bridges the gap between hearing from God (in Scripture) and speaking to him in prayer. Puritan



Thomas Manton said this: “What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer.” This will be the model for our daily devotionals during the fast.

- If your days are full and you can’t find the time to take a break, consider reading through the booklet on Sunday night, to prepare your heart for what’s to come.
- If you have kids this a great opportunity to introduce them and include them to the concept of fasting. Make sure you clarify the purpose of fasting in an age appropriate manner. Much of how they will participate will depend on their age so here are some age appropriate suggestions:
 - Age 5-9. Abstaining from candy, soda and dessert.
 - Age 10-13. Abstaining from one meal during the day. This HAS to be done wisely and with faith, if it is an intense sports season consider a protein drink as a meal replacement.
 - 14 and older. Depending on the maturity of your child, they can make the same choices that you, as an adult would make.
- If you do have children that are abstaining from food, this is obviously a great opportunity to be more intentional with family prayer and/or devotions.



DAY ONE

Monday, September 11

HUMBLE CONFIDENCE

We will be going through Ezra 8-9 during this fast, recalling a moment in Israel's history when Ezra leads a group of Israelites out of exile in Babylon to return to Jerusalem. Today we will be focusing on 8:21-23, when Ezra calls the exiled Israelites to fast and pray, humbly asking God for a safe journey on their return to Jerusalem. Today, let the weakness and hunger you feel lead you to humility. Let it remind you of your reliance on God. Let your confidence in his provision and grace grow as your confidence in your own flesh falters.

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 8:21-23

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, 'The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.' So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty."

MEDITATION

Spend at least 15 minutes meditating on this text, reading them repeatedly, pondering words and phrases within them, in a distraction-free place, before moving into prayer.

PRAYER

- How has God provided us a "safe journey" thus far as a church? As individuals? Reflect on his goodness to you and to us as a church. Meditate on the words, "The hand of our God is for good

on all who seek him.” Where has God’s hand been in your life?

- Notice the inner struggle Ezra seems to be experiencing to trust in God's provision rather than the power of human leaders ("For I was ashamed to ask the king..."). Spend time reflecting on ways that you have looked to human power (maybe your own, maybe that of another person, a political leader, etc.) for safety and protection, rather than looking to God. Reflect on where you have not been confident God is sovereign or would provide.
- "We fasted and implored our God for this..." The word implore is strong. Other translations use the word plead or petition or earnestly prayed. What do you have faith to implore God for in this fast?

NOTES

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

DAY TWO

Tuesday, September 12

PRAYERS OF REPENTANCE

Today's reading finds Ezra in a posture of repentance, tearing his garment and falling on his knees before God, repenting for the "faithlessness" of the returning Jewish exiles for mixing with idolatrous non-Jewish groups in religion and marriage. God's people had abandoned their set-apartness and blended in with worldly surroundings. Though our New Covenant context is different today, followers of Jesus are still called to be holy and set apart (see Matthew 5, 1 Peter 2, etc.). How are we forsaking that call and putting our desires to blend in or worship other things above our call to be "a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 2:9)?

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 9:1-6

"After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.' As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, saying: 'O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.'"

MEDITATION

Spend at least 15 minutes meditating on this text, reading them repeatedly, pondering words and phrases within them, perhaps even trying to memorize them. Silently meditate on them, in a distraction-free place, before moving into prayer.

PRAYER

- Search your heart for areas where you have been unfaithful to your calling as a member of God's family. Where have you "mixed" with the world and compromised your calling? In what ways is your witness not as "set apart" as it should be? Repent for these things.
- Which sins in your life lead you to the strong feelings of guilt and remorse that Ezra expresses in this passage ("I sat appalled... fell upon my knees... I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you")? Cry out to God in repentance for these.
- Where is there "faithlessness" in your life? Are there areas of struggle in your life where you don't have faith for growth/change? Are there things about God you struggle to believe? Pray through this unbelief and ask God for more faith.

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DAY THREE

Wednesday, September 13

PRAYERS FOR REVIVAL

Today we conclude the fast by focusing on revival, worship and mission. In our passage of Scripture for today, Ezra continues his prayer of lament and repents for the disobedience of God's people as they return from exile. But in spite of their sin, God has shown favor to his covenantal people. He has "extended to us his steadfast love" and "[granted] us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins..." (9:9). God uses us in spite of our sin and faltering faith. Today we praise him for this and plead with him to continue using us, to grant us some reviving so that we have clarity on who we are in Him and what we are to do in our mission.

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 9:7-9

"From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem."

MEDITATION

Spend at least 15 minutes meditating on this text, reading them repeatedly, pondering words and phrases within them, perhaps even trying to memorize them. Silently meditate on them, in a distraction-free place, before moving into prayer.

PRAYER

- Pray for revival in your own life, for holiness, transformation and zeal for mission.
- Pray for revival in Southlands, that the Holy Spirit would unite us and grow us and transform us, and through us our communities and spheres of influence.
- Pray for revival in our cities, our nation and in the world. Pray for the church's witness to not be compromised in these days of division and confusion, but to be powerful and attractive.

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