

Was It For Me That You Fasted?

Zechariah 7:5-6

I want you to encourage you to fast this week. I want to encourage you to pray. I want to encourage you to seek God in a special way. I want to encourage you folks to come to the prayer meeting on Wednesday, fasting. I want to by way of reminder – if you're visiting today I can tell you this, that we have not found prayer here to be a useless endeavor – at all. We have found the Lord very faithful to give us very many of the things that we've asked for. We have sought over these years to seek the Lord the first week of the year. And God helping us, it won't become just some formality, some tradition that we start the year with. But I do want to encourage you, pray this week, pray with an intensity, pray with an unusual fervency, pray, get together with others from the church, determine you're going to pray, determine you're going to set aside time in the morning, at lunch, in the evening, and pray. Fast, fast a meal, fast a day, three days, seven days, a meal every day, whatever it is. There's not any specific instruction but seek the Lord. I feel some things forming in my own heart right now that I definitely want to pray for. And so today officially we start what we want to be a week dedicated to laying hold on the arm of the Lord. And my message this morning is connected with this, and before I dive in to the text, I want to take this time to go before the Lord. Let's pray:

Father, you have been our help in ages past. Lord, we don't look at the last eight years as ages past, but we know that there are those men and women we're going to dwell with forever and forever and forever. Men and women like us, made of the same stuff that we're made of, children, sons and daughters of Adam, who have by the grace of God, by the spilled blood of Jesus Christ, we've been ransomed from among all the nations. Our brothers and sisters have gone before us and they've known your faithfulness and you've been faithful to your people. And you've been a God who answers prayer to our brothers and sisters. They've left a testimony to how you have been with your people, how you've heard the prayers of your people, how you've comforted your people, how you've drawn near to them. How you've stooped in their times of need, and Father, these eight years as a church here we can bear witness to it, you've not left us to ourselves. Father, please I pray that these weeks of prayer and fasting would not become cold, formal traditions, but I pray that they would be weeks where we start the year where the life of this church, where there's true life, Lord, where there's true, vital Christianity put on display. I pray that as we start 2010. Father, be a help to us, not just in ages past, but in the time present. Be a help to us in 2010. Father, we pray that that would be the witness, that could be borne out by this church when we look back a year from now, that our God has been faithful once again, there's just no debate, there's no doubt. Father, be a help. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Brethren, I would have you turn this morning to Zechariah chapter 7. Look with me there. Zechariah is the second to the last book in the Old Testament so if you can find Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, you go back before Matthew two books and you're there. Zechariah 7:1 (may God help us): **"In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev."**

Okay, let's stop right here. Everybody? I see Pete there, he comes into my sight. Pete, have you ever thought about the fourth year of Darius before? Probably none of us care much about that year, you've probably not thought about it, probably doesn't really matter to you. The fourth year of Darius doesn't have much impact if you

go to college, if you go to the workplace, if you come to church, and it probably never mattered to you before. But this morning I want it to matter to us because there's something about the fourth year of King Darius that might impact our upcoming week of intensified fasting. Now here it is, you guys ready for a history lesson? Typically we don't spend a whole lot of time with history, but sometimes when you go into the Old Testament, we need to. There's some significance here. Look, six hundred years before our Lord Jesus Christ walked this earth, which would be about 2600 years ago from right now, let me tell you something, a very famous king conquered Jerusalem. Now, by the way, Zechariah is in Jerusalem when he's giving forth this prophetic utterance. Well, about six hundred years before our Lord, a famous king conquered that city of Jerusalem, which by the way was the capital of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, or Judea. Let me ask you – who was that king? Nebuchadnezzar.

Let me tell you something about Nebuchadnezzar. He came in to Judah and he besieged the city of Jerusalem, he took the city, and he laid it waste. And he killed many of God's so-called people, the Jews. Put them to the sword, or they died during the sieges that he put the city under. Can I tell you this? The prophet Jeremiah actually tells us that God called Nebuchadnezzar, "my servant." What does that mean when God calls a king who comes to Jerusalem, besieges it, lays it waste, kills many of the people, leads many of them away, and then God looks at him and says, "He's my servant."?

What does that tell us? It tells us that what Nebuchadnezzar was doing is at the bidding of God. What was happening in the overthrow was indeed according to God's will. He was his servant carrying out his Master's bidding. When Nebuchadnezzar invaded, destroyed, he was doing the Lord's work. And here's what was happening. For years the Lord had said to Judah, and to Jerusalem, and to its kings, "There is doom on the horizon." Why? All their idolatries, all their wickedness, and God kept telling them through one prophet after another, "Judgment is coming, my wrath is burning against you." And they by and large ignored it, did they not?

Now, once in a while there was a good king. In fact, right there towards the end right before Nebuchadnezzar came in, you had guys like Josiah and Hezekiah. But God's wrath was burning against them. And even though these good men came in, for their good, God spared them in the day of those good kings, but he didn't turn aside his wrath. The good of those men, whatever good things they did, did not quench God's wrath. It only delayed it. God only promised not to bring that wrath in their day. Well, folks, finally God's patience ran out. God's patience ran out, the people had forsaken God, they had provoked him repeatedly by their idolatries, and that destruction came. And let me tell you that destruction came by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar and his armies.

Now, here's the thing I want you to see. When this invasion took place, this Babylonian conquering, two notable events occurred. Who knows? Who can tell me? Anybody that can guess right off? What two notable things happened – I mean, very notable, that are emphasized in the Scripture as being especially notable, that took place when Nebuchadnezzar came in and destroyed Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed, that was one. What's the other thing? Exiled. Babylonian captivity, right? And how long did they go into the Babylonian captivity? Jeremiah tells us – seventy years. So you have this. Now, many of the Jews were killed. They were killed in the siege, they died of famine, they died of disease, and then when they came in, many died by the sword. But of those that were left over, the vast majority of them were hauled away into Babylonian captivity. Nebuchadnezzar took them away.

The second notable thing, and I'll let the writer of 2 Kings tell us, which Priscilla just hit on. Guys, get this: 2 Kings 25:8. (Now this is really important to where we're going. You say, what does this have to do with our week of prayer and fasting? Well, hold on, just bear with me.) **"In the fifth month..."** – now everybody, this is going to be on the quiz, because I'm going to come back and ask you about this later – what month? Fifth month. Okay. **"In the fifth month..."** – everybody remember this because Zechariah is going to tell us something very interesting about the fifth month – **"In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of**

King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.” And what did he do? He burned the house of the Lord.

There you have it. And what month was it? The fifth month on the seventh day of that month. Nebuchadnezzar had one of his captains destroy the house of the Lord. Now you have to picture this – to us it doesn't mean a whole lot, to us Gentiles. But to them, this was the Temple of God. This is the very focal point of the Jews' worship of the living God. It was gone, it was destroyed, there was no more Holy of Holies, there could be no more day of atonement, and the altar was gone. No more sacrifices. That was the place where the Jews put the Ark of God. No more place for the Ark of God. That was the place where the Shekinah glory of God would settle over the mercy seat, the place is gone! And for the Jews, that was catastrophic. Absolutely. Those are the two things that happened. The Jews are led away into Babylonian captivity, but probably even more so, the Temple is destroyed.

Now, how many years were going to go by before the Babylonian captivity ended? Seventy years. Well, here's what happened. Seventy years went by, another king is on the throne by the name of Cyrus. And guess what happens? We find this in Ezra. Turn over to Ezra chapter 1. Right at the beginning, here's what happened, Ezra tells us this. God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus and so Cyrus came to the Jews and said, “Look, God has commissioned me to rebuild the Temple, to build a house for the Lord.”

Now that's very interesting coming from a pagan king. And so he says, whatever Jews of you that are interested in taking part in this, go back and do it, and I'll give you all these resources. And so, they go back, in order to rebuild the house of the Lord. A bunch of these Jews go to the broken down rubble of Jerusalem and what do they do? It tells us there in the third chapter of Ezra that they laid the foundation of the Temple. But then something happens, look at Ezra 4:4. I want you to see something. **“Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build...”**

So here's what happened. They laid the foundation but then the enemies of God came in and they began to resist them and they made them afraid, and so, in fear the people of Judah stopped building. Now look at Ezra 4:24: **“Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped...”** So here's what I want you to see. Nebuchadnezzar came in, he wrecked the Temple, seventy years later Cyrus is stirred up, he sends the Jews back, they go in, they lay the foundation, but out of fear for the people of the land, under Cyrus, in that time, they stopped building. But then look at the second half of Ezra 4:24, now catch this: **“and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”**

Okay, does that ring any bells with us? You guys notice that when we started Zechariah, it was what year? The fourth year of King Darius. So when the reconstruction started again, it was in the second year, so when Zechariah gives the prophecy, it's only two years removed from that, right? Now look at one other thing here, before we leave Ezra, look at Ezra 6:15 – it tells us when the Temple was completed. The renewed Temple, the reconstructed Temple: **“and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.”**

Okay, everybody, in the second year of Darius they started the reconstruction again, the sixth year they completed it. The fourth year when Zechariah gives us this prophecy is exactly in the middle. Which means, when Zechariah gives us this prophetic utterance in Zechariah 7, the Temple is probably roughly about how far completed? About half. Everybody knows it's being reconstructed, it's about halfway done, it's been being worked on for two years, and it'll be completed two years from then.

Okay, everybody back to Zechariah 7. (I am going somewhere with all this, folks. Don't fall asleep on me.) So we turn back to Zechariah 7:2. We already saw in Zechariah 7:1 that we're in the fourth year of King Darius, now look at Zechariah 7:2: **“Now the people of Bethel** (Bethel was a city about 11 miles north of Jerusalem) **had sent**

Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men to entreat the favor of the Lord.” Interesting, Babylonian names, which means that these folks that were sent were probably Jews who were born during the Babylonian captivity, thus the Babylonian names. But they’re sent from Bethel, these two men, with their men, **“to entreat the favor of the Lord.”** They came to ask something of the Lord. They came to entreat his favor. They came to pray, they came to ask a question namely. **“...saying to the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets.”** (Zechariah 7:3a)

So this is how they came to inquire of the Lord, they went to the priests, they went to Jerusalem, where the priests were, they went to where these prophets were and here’s the question they asked, **“Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?”** (Zechariah 7:3b)

Notice carefully what’s happening here. What happened in the fifth month? We’ve already talked about the fifth month before. What happened in the fifth month? Nebuzaradan burned the Temple. For so many years, they’ve been fasting in the fifth month. And their question is, “Lord, should we keep fasting or not?” Now, it says here, **“Should I weep and abstain...”** You see the word “abstain” – that’s fasting. That’s what it means by abstaining. They were abstaining from food. They were fasting, in the fifth month of each year, they had been doing it for many years, in fact, jump ahead to verses 4 and 5 with me, you’ll see that they’ve been fasting like this for seventy years. Zechariah 7:4: **“Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: ‘Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh (now there was another fast in the seventh and it had to do with something that happened in the seventh month), for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?’”** (Zechariah 7:4-5) Now here’s the question. Why do you suppose these people of Bethel had been fasting in the fifth month for the past seventy years? Well, it was their way of showing forth sorrow and abstaining from food because of the loss of their Temple which took place in the fifth month.

You say, what happened in the seventh month? Well, actually, if you go over to the next chapter, Zechariah 8, they also fasted in the fourth month, and in the tenth month you find out in verse 19. And if you go back and you look you can see there’s all sorts of things back in 2 Kings and in the Chronicles of all that happened back then that show us why they fasted in all those different months. There were very particular things.

But the thing that these Jews had in their mind was, “Should we continue with this fifth month fast?” Seventy years, fifth month, seventh day of the month. Jews had committed themselves to fasting and mourning over the loss of the Temple, but here’s the thing. You can imagine what’s going on in their mind. Now we’re halfway through the reconstruction of it. You can imagine what’s happening with the people at Bethel. They’re thinking, well look, the Temple is halfway reconstructed, should we keep going on with this fast that we’re doing in commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, when in fact, there’s a new Temple being built? You see how that could be going on in their minds, right? That’s not so far-fetched.

So, they send a delegation to the priests and to the prophets in Jerusalem and they asked them if they should continue to practice their fasting, or if they should give it up. Well, one of the prophets who happened to be there in Jerusalem to whom the delegation inquired was, of course, the prophet Zechariah. And in verse 4, he says, **“Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me...”** Let’s hear once again what it was the Lord had to say: **“Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?”** (Zechariah 7:5) What an answer.

And then read verse 6: **“And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?”** (Zechariah 7:6) The Lord says for seventy years you fasted and it wasn’t for me that you fasted. You also ate and drank during that time – that wasn’t for me either. When you fasted, or whether you didn’t fast, you did it for yourselves.

Now let's consider the answer the Lord gave to this delegation. They came with a question about fasting. Here we are, and we're headed ourselves into a time of fasting. What could we learn from this? And I simply, as I wrap up the message today, I gave you this big history lesson, but I want to bring four things out of this, that I want us just to think about.

Here's the first thing. You know what, we are people who ask questions all the time because if you're going to serve the Lord, you're obviously running data through your mind, right? You're asking questions all the time. Should I do that? Should I not do that? Maybe it's already occurring to our minds – will I fast this week, will I not fast this week? Will I fast on Wednesday, coming into the prayer meeting, or won't I? Or one meal a day, or....

Obviously, we decide, we make decisions, we ask ourselves questions, but here's my first point. Often we don't ask the right questions. The Lord obviously did not think the question of this delegation was even worth answering. You know what, he never answers it. At least, he never answers it the way they were looking for an answer. Zechariah 7:3: **“Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?”** They're kind of looking for a *yes* or *no*. Their answer, in 7:5, was, **“When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?”**

Look, could you imagine what went into the sending of this delegation? Could you imagine – you take two men and all their men, and you actually send them officially to go to Jerusalem to ask the priests and the prophets. Now, guess what? That just doesn't happen out of the blue. You send a delegation, and what probably went before it? You have some people at Bethel and they were saying, “You know, I'm not so certain we should keep this fast going because the Temple over there in Jerusalem is being reconstructed.” And some of the others might have been saying, “Well, I don't know, they're the traditionalists.” They're like the people that fought Isaac Watts, “Hey, we've been doing this for so long, we're not going to change now.” Right? Or, maybe they're thinking, they're not so traditional, but they're just thinking, “But it's not done yet, maybe we should keep going all the way until it's done.” And so back and forth they're going. You could imagine the kind of discussion that went into it, and guess what? They thought this was an absolutely important question to answer, or you don't send a delegation to Jerusalem.

But isn't it amazing, when they get there, the Lord just bypasses it altogether. All the work, all the effort, all the importance that it seemed to be to them, God says, “It's not even the issue. Your important questions don't mean anything to me, because you've missed the heart of the matter.”

And I just ask ourselves this, brethren, when, as we go into this week, any time in the year we give ourselves to prayer and fasting, any time we give ourselves to anything. Because here's the thing. There's no question about it. Our Christianity is going to be worked out. Yes, it's a matter of the heart, but a following of Christ that is the matter of the heart, it expresses itself in actions, in activities, in ministries, right? There's expression to what we believe, there's expression that comes and flows out of us based on what we love. And so even though yes, the critical matter is the heart, when the heart is right, it springs forward and it flows forth in expressions and activities and works that are a direct reflection of where the heart's at. You can never say the heart is right and it doesn't produce itself in right actions and right demonstrations.

And you know what, all through this year, as much as activity as takes place in this church, we're asking questions all the time – should we do that, shouldn't we do that, might we do this, might we do the other thing. They got to the place where they said, “Well, we feel this is absolutely critical, this is essential, let's send this party of men to Jerusalem and get an answer.” They felt it critical. They find Zechariah, the prophet of God. I mean, here's the thing, folks, they felt it critical to get an answer. They felt it critical to send the party of men to Jerusalem to get that answer. They find Zechariah the prophet of God, a man who gets messages directly from God. He's a man

from whom they can get an answer, and then they never really get an answer. They're never told, "Yes, continue with your fast," or "No, stop your fasting."

Now think with me brethren, just think with me. What were these men at Bethel really trying to figure out, when they're asking the question, should we fast or should we not fast? Why would they even ask that question? Look, think with me here. Why didn't they just say, "Well, we think we should quit," and quit? Why not? Or, why not, "Well, we think we ought to keep doing it?" Or why not, "Hey, you guys think you ought to stop, you stop. You guys all on this side think you ought to do it, do it." Why not just get to the place where they made up their own mind, made up their own decision and just went with it? Why send a delegation to Jerusalem? What's really behind all this?

Folks, why would you do that? Why would they do that? You know what, it seems to be, you ask the Lord about this, and you don't decide for yourself, because the assumption is, you go ask the Lord for an answer to the question, if you're really concerned about what the Lord thinks, right? And look, you don't send the delegation there if you just absolutely say to yourself, "Well, we don't care what the Lord thinks at all, then we're just going to do what we want to do." Why do you send the delegation? You send the delegation because you're looking to get an answer from God. They came to inquire, to beseech the favor of God. They were looking for him for some response to tell them to go to the right or to go to the left. Because, apparently, it seems that they were interested and concerned about what the Lord thinks. Brethren, the whole assumption behind this whole thing is that there is a God in heaven who you believe is either going to be more pleased if I fast or more pleased if I don't fast. Right? That's what goes into this whole thing. Find out which is more pleasing to him, so that we can then do what is most pleasing to him. But the Lord never even gives them a *yes* or *no* answer to their question. In fact, when he speaks to them, he's saying to them, "I want you to know you basically are in a lose/lose situation. You haven't been pleasing to me when you fast, you haven't been pleasing to me when you eat. You come here asking me whether you should continue to fast or not, maybe either way, it's not pleasing to me."

The Lord is implying that they aren't even asking the right question. What is really important in life, what is most to be sought after isn't even captured by their question. The Lord is implying that their question is trivial. It may have seemed important to them, but God says, "It's really quite frivolous."

Brethren, now think about this with me. You see that was their assumption, that there was a way that would be pleasing to the Lord. And they ask a question, they really asked a question, that there was no answer to that would be pleasing to the Lord. Because there was another question altogether that should have been asked by them. And brethren, we can get to the same place. We become so concerned with certain questions and sometimes we miss the heart of the matter. We ask ourselves, should we do this, should we not do this, should we be involved over here, should we not be involved over here, and all the time, the Lord is there, saying, "It's no good either way."

Brethren, here we are. I want us to seek the Lord this week. But as you go into this week, I want you to ask that question – are you going into the week for the Lord? We need to ask ourselves the questions that matter. That's the real question we need to ask ourselves.

Let me go to the second thing. The heart of everything. The first one was that we don't always ask the right questions. The second thing I want us to notice is: what is at the heart of the right question? Brethren, I just say this, beware of ceremony, beware of tradition, and beware of ritual. Folks, we what do or don't do as a church, I can tell you this. If you and I are going to be committed to doing what pleases the Lord, or what we believe pleases the Lord, and we're willing to cast off all tradition and all ritual and all ceremony, we're going to end up

like Isaac Watts. People are going to come and they're going to be uptight and upset because we don't do it the traditional way.

Brethren, the question for us to ask is not, have Baptists done this for the last three hundred years? Now if they have, we might want to give consideration as to why they have. You don't want to cast off the old paths just to be new. But we need to get a feel for what really matters to God and what's just tradition. And I guarantee you we can fall into – folks, there is something in us, every one of us, that is inclined to tradition. And what can happen is, let me tell you, I have read many a biography, and I have read many biographies on revival and great awakenings, and on church history, and I can tell you something that happens. Churches start out in the beginning with life and fire, enthusiasm, a deep seated love for the Lord, a love for Christ, and out of that love, certain things spring forth. But in the coming years, and the coming generations, they begin to do the things that the early church did out of a hot and passionate heart, they begin to do them because it's seen as the way to do it.

Brethren, throughout history, where revival has come, where God has moved, many people will come along and look at what the church or the people of God who experienced this revival, or this closeness or this move of God, they'll look at them to see what they did, how they did it, and then they'll turn around and try to imitate the whole thing by doing the very things they did – which is to miss the heart of the matter. Brethren, I've seen it. When God comes in certain places, people want to look and say, "Okay, what's true, let's imitate that, let's do that." And then their trust is put in the things they do, not in the God behind it.

And brethren, we need to beware of that. We need to beware. God said, **"This people draw near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me."** (Isaiah 29:13) Brethren, I'll tell you this, in many ways, it may not matter what we do and what ministries we're involved with, as much as where our heart is, and our heart being close to God. I think it's very likely when our hearts are close to God we can give ourselves to just about anything. And Christ is with us. That's not to say that God doesn't have specific purposes and plans for us, I'm not moving off of that.

Brethren, God has designed us in his image. We're not clueless about this. Brother Matt had a lot of you folks write letters to me not too long ago. And my wife has been bringing these letters to me on a regular basis. I haven't actually read all of them yet, but I've been consistently going through them, and you brethren, you've expressed your love and your affection and your gratitude to me, and it's definitely been a blessing.

But now suppose this. Suppose I'm starting my day out tomorrow morning, Monday morning, and I'm in the Word, and Ruby comes and she brings me another letter and I pull it out, and it's from Brother so-and-so. And he says, "I'm writing this letter to you because it's my duty to do it. Matt twisted my arm. Since I'm a member of this church I guess I'm somewhat obligated to write this letter, like everyone else is doing. And besides this, I just got a new pen, and I wanted to try it out, I couldn't think of anything besides this to try it out on. And so I'm writing this letter to you in order to break in my new pen and because writing a letter to you is required of me. So anyway, thanks for being my pastor." And I say, Ruby, "That was not a good letter."

Brethren, you know as well as I do, no one's going to be blessed by a letter like that. If you receive a letter like that, it certainly isn't endearing to you. Brethren, just about all of these letters have been really endearing to me and affectionate to me, and expressing appreciation. Brethren, if you get letters like that...

You know, when people out of a sense of joy, out of a sense of appreciation, out of a sense of being helped – and when that is communicated in a letter, you appreciate it if you get it. But when somebody gives you something that – I mean just think about it, I was reminded, just recently when Ruby and I went away on this thing, we got some gift cards from some people. Imagine this, imagine if somebody came up to you and they have a gift card for a restaurant here and they come up and they give it to you and they say, "Sister, I'm giving you this card because I

love you, you just don't know how much I appreciate you, and how much God has knitted my heart with you, and this is the least I could do." You walk away and you know what? Even if that thing's for \$5, you're thinking, "That's great."

If some kid comes up to you out of the church and he says, "Here, my mom told me to come give this to you, plus she told me that if I did it, she'd give me a dollar, and so here." I mean, you might have appreciation for the mother, but there's no appreciation communicated, why? There's no heart in it.

When there's heart, you see, brethren, it's true of all of us, when somebody shows us appreciation like that, in love and gratitude, it honors us. But when people come and do things just out of a cold, mechanical duty, we're not honored in it. In fact, we're dishonored. A letter like that, if I were to receive it, wouldn't be an honor to me, it would be a dishonor. And you know that as well, we all feel that. Well, folks, the Lord God is exactly in that same place when people do things heartlessly out of ceremony, out of ritual.

You see, brethren, entering into this week, there needs to be something. Remember, what was it, Mark hit it from Psalm 37:4 on Wednesday, **"Delight yourself also in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart."** Brethren, if we go into this week of prayer and fasting, and our hearts delight in the Lord, and we come before our Father who sees in secret, and we come to him in fasting and in prayer, "Lord, we're coming to you, we want you – away with all the ritual, away with all the tradition..."

Brethren, you know what I find? Listen to these Psalms. David says in Psalm 43: **"Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God."** (Psalm 43:4) Where was the altar? At the Temple. Temple's destroyed. Let me tell you this, if you've got a heart like that – **"I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy."**

Or how about this one? This one deals with the Temple too. Psalm 27:4: **"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,"** Why? **"...to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple."**

Or about this? Psalm 84:2: **"My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God."**

Let me tell you something. If you have a heart like David where, "I want to be, oh, when can I come and stand before the Living God? When can I go to his altar? When can I go into the courts of the Lord? When can I go to his Temple? Why? Because he's my exceeding joy."

Let me tell you what, when that thing gets burned down and you say, "I'm going to fast every day," and it's out of sorrow because you can't go to where the Shekinah is anymore, you can't go to that central place where God meets with his people, and you're longing...let me tell you something, when all of a sudden the Temple is being built again, you don't send an entourage to Jerusalem to ask about it. Because as soon as it's being built your heart is full of joy and you're not going to go in sorrow on that day anymore.

I'll tell you this, by the very question they ask, they showed where their hearts were. Because so often brethren, what we do when our hearts are on fire for the Lord, it's spontaneous, and what we do is going to be dictated and directed by a hot heart. It's a cold heart that sends to ask that question. Many times the questions we ask, they're a sign of coldness and reservation. I'll tell you what, when a person is madly and passionately in love they don't have to ask the question. Imagine a woman during World War II and her husband was off at war for four years and now the ship has come into port and she's there to meet him and the gang plank is down and the stairs, and the soldiers are coming down and there's her husband. She doesn't have to look to the guy next to her in the crowd and say, "You think it's okay if I smile?"

It's spontaneous, why? Because of the love and the affection she has for him. Brethren, let me tell you, a lot of the questions that we ask about the things we do, they're a dead giveaway. So often when there's passion you have to hold people back. Brethren, don't go into this week coldly.

A third thing I'd bring up and two quick things I want to end with here, look at this. If you look there at Zechariah 7:4-5: **"Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: 'Say to all the people of the land and the priests...'"** Now who are the priests? Let me tell you who the priests are; you don't have turn here, but listen. Malachi 2:7 says, **"For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts."**

2 Chronicles 35:3: **"[Josiah] said to the Levites who taught all Israel..."**

Leviticus 10:11: **"and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes [of] the Lord..."**

Guess what the priests were under the old covenant? They were the teachers. Isn't it interesting? Now check this out. Can you just imagine the picture? You have all these dignified looking priests in all their priestly garb, and here comes these folks from Bethel. And they're receiving them, and Haggai and Zechariah were among the prophets, we know that. They're over here among the prophets and this group of men come and they're seeking the favor of the Lord and they're looking for an answer to this question and they come and they've got the prophets over here and the priests over there and they're asking for an answer to their question and suddenly the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah over here among the prophets and he says, **"Say to the priests..."** These are the guys that are being come to! These are the guys that are being asked! They're over here in the other group and he just doesn't say it to this whole group of people who are representatives of Bethel, he looks right across at the teachers and he says, "Say it to them too!"

Whoa! They're thinking, how'd we get dragged into this, we weren't even part – they came to *us* for an answer. How are we getting pulled in?

Brethren, let me say this. The leaders in this church, and I'm exhorting, admonishing every man that teaches in this church. God especially has a case with you. And he will single you out just as he did here. Why? Because the leaders – we are going to lead in whether this church becomes traditional, ceremonial, or ritualistic. We are going to be the people that are teaching. We are the people that, by our life, our teaching, and our example, are going to show whether Christ is really precious and whether he is to be ran after with our whole hearts and all our energy and a willingness to sacrifice anything and everything. And he calls out the teacher and so I want to call out the teacher.

The last thing, the fourth point here, is that before he addresses them, he says, "I say this to all the people in the land..." (Zechariah 7:5) and I say this to us. When you fasted in the first month these past nine years, was it for the Lord that you fasted? That's a question we need to ask ourselves. And I just leave you with this. Brethren, how do we fast for the Lord? And here's a question that you and I need to answer. When is our fasting looked at by God as being for him? I tell you this, if you come to this church and you say, "Wow, we have heard how God has answered so many of their prayers. We heard Brother Tim on Wednesday talking about how God helped him in his financial need. I'm getting involved in this week-long fast, I'm going to pray to God that he'd give me money to buy a new car." Now look, I'm not saying that necessarily that could be wrong, or right. I'm saying that if you're doing it for yourself, and you don't have any eye to the glory of the Lord...

Let me break this down, I think, from the Psalms, because the Psalms is where worship flows. But as I look at the Psalms, I see what I think are at least three ways that we fast for the Lord. The one might be just like this: when we're erupting with joy for the Lord.

Like say, Psalm 36: **“How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.”** (Psalm 36:7-9)

Or the one that I already said, **“One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.”** (Psalm 27:4)

Psalm 27:8: **“You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, Lord, do I seek.’”**

When we have a heart that is just ecstatic with the Lord, when the Lord is our joy, when Christ thrills our soul – I mean, when you can’t wait to fast, because you’re delighting in the Lord and the thought of the season of getting alone with the Lord is a delight, why? Because you find him beautiful, you want to gaze upon his beauty like the Psalmist, you want to inquire of him, you find the word from his lips to be more precious than gold or silver, you find his direction – guide me. Acknowledge him in all your ways, and you want him and you cherish that and you value him and you appreciate him and you’re just looking for the opportunity to go before him. Brethren, that’s one way it’s for the Lord. When you basically show that you think he is worth more than anything else, and you’re willing to take a whole week and maybe put aside television, put aside all the garbage and put aside this, put aside the trivial stuff in your life because he’s precious to you and your heart is erupting with that – certainly God looks at that and says, “I’m pleased. That shows that they count me more worthy than all the stuff here.”

But then, is there not another way possibly? Brethren, that’s when we *aren’t* erupting with the joy of the Lord. But there’s a hunger. Now I realize this one and the first one can be awfully close together, because a lot of times when you have the most satisfaction in the Lord, you all the more desire and hunger for more. I realize that. But brethren, we get to places in our life where, you know it as well as I do, our delight in the Lord is not at fever pitch, but we realize it, and we hunger for it. Maybe for whatever reason God has hid his face, we’re not enjoying his smile, but that’s just driving us crazy. We want it, we long for it.

How about this – Psalm 63: **“O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”** (Psalm 63:1)

Or Psalm 42:5: **“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”**

Folks, we get like that sometimes, but see, that is for the Lord too, because we run to him and we say, Lord, we can’t find you, we can’t have it like we’ve had it before, but we want it and we hunger for it. We desire after it.

Why is that for the Lord? David Brainerd said,

Of late, God has been pleased to keep my soul hungry, almost continually; so that I’ve been filled with a kind of pleasing pain. When I really enjoy God, I feel my desires of him the more insatiable and my thirsting after holiness more unquenchable.¹

Brethren, when you hunger and thirst after God it shows, again, that you esteem God to be the most satisfying thing. By the extent of your hunger you show the extent to which you believe he is satisfying. And so we have those times when he is our delight, we have those times when we just can’t find his face and we’re hungering and longing after it.

¹ (David Brainerd, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*, ed. Jonathan Edwards. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), pp. 103.)

And brethren, how about this last one? When we're not erupting with joy of the Lord, and we're not even hungering the way we have at other times. Maybe we find a bitterness in soul, we're even pricked in the heart because we feel so cold and so lifeless. Can that not be for the Lord too? Listen to the Psalmist. Psalm 73:21-23: **"...my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand."**

And sometimes we have that. "Lord, I don't even have the desires I want to have. I feel like a brute beast. Lord, I don't feel much better than I felt when I was lost. But I'm pricked in my heart; I'm convicted. I don't have the joy I once had. I don't even have the hunger I once had, but my soul is embittered about it."

Brethren, these are different degrees to which we get in our life, but I'll tell you they're all for the Lord. And look, brethren – God said, he accused them, "When you eat, you do it for yourself." Brethren, he's not saying that when it's for the Lord, that we somehow abandon all desires. Look: **"Delight yourself in the Lord."** (Psalm 37:4) Does he not get great glory out of that? Certainly he does. And what do we get? We get delight. And he'll give us the desires of our heart. But brethren, there is a way to fast for the Lord, there is a way to carry forth for the Lord, there is a way for us to approach this year ahead for the Lord.

Brethren, we want to be a church that glorifies and honors the Lord. We want to be a church that prays and fasts for the Lord. Brethren, how can we measure this? How can we see this? I'll tell you this, look at your desires in this week. Are they all for yourself? Let me ask you this: you hear that we asked a year ago for seven of the children in the orphanage over in China to be saved, and when word came the last prayer meeting of the year that it seems as though God has given us what we asked for, were you filled with joy? Or, because it has nothing to do with you, you honestly don't care? Brethren, I would say that that's a good indication right now that you do not have a heart that's right. You know why the true child of God can so rejoice in that? It is because it gets the Lord honor and glory. It gives us boasting rights. Does it not? I mean, we can go to people and say, "Let me tell you what our God has done!"

"Yeah, but he didn't save your own children."

"Yeah, but you're missing it. We asked the Lord to do this and he did it."

"Yeah, but it doesn't really have anything to do with you."

"Yes it does, because he's our God and when he's honored, we rejoice!"

Brethren, there can be a place to asking the Lord for financial assistance, but we need to ask ourselves, "Are we really interested?" I mean, look, if it was likely that the Lord would be more honored if I went into bankruptcy this year, could I rejoice that it be so? If God determines to take me in the opposite direction and he's going to be glorified in that, can I [rejoice]?

Brethren, the things we ask for – we need to ask the right questions. Here's what I think. Lord, if I ask you – we are multiplying the families in the church where there's a spouse in the family that doesn't love Christ, would the Lord be honored if one of these spouses was converted? You say, "But what if isn't your own spouse?"

Well so be it. But will the Lord be honored? Brethren, I just think we need to watch ourselves, let our prayers not be selfish, self-centered, all self-motivated. Not that we don't get joy out of it, not that we don't get delight in the midst of it. This is a cause for great rejoicing when God answers our prayers, but brethren, are we doing it for the Lord? This covers everything that we do as a church.

But we are very specifically coming up on a week of prayer and fasting. I'll tell you this brethren, **"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."** (Mark 7:6) Can I tell you this? God wants your heart. And if you're coming to a place where you're getting burned out in ministry and you're not doing it the way you once did for the delight of the Lord, I would say, step back. I would say, you know what, there comes times where we just need sabbaticals. Step back, slow down, be still, and know that he is God. (Psalm 46:10) And come back into communion with him. Better off you did less and did it in the joy of the Lord. And did it for him.

Brethren, we can do this – we can start out and we are doing it out of a great affection for the Lord, and we get to the place where we grow cold, weary, wore out, and wiped out, we don't experience the smile of the Lord anymore. We don't know where he's gone. I'm not saying step out of life and stop doing the things you have to do, but sometimes there are times when we just need to lay down all the ministry, all the activity, and be still before the Lord. And come back to where we are reconnecting with him and delighting in him.

I guarantee you, God does not want us to carry on in 2010 with cold hearts and with lip service. He wants our hearts, he wants our affection, he wants our desires in him, he wants our delights in him, he wants us rejoicing in him, just like if somebody came and gave you that gift card. Brethren, you want the person to come give it to you because they say, "I love you, I adore you, I have affection for you, I delight in being around you, I love you sister, I love you brother, this is the least I could do, this is just an outflow of my heart."

That honors you, and that gives you joy, and that is pleasing to you, and it is the same with the Lord. You bring your dry, stale thing to him – away with it! Be done with it. If any of you are just wiped out by what you're doing, sit down, take a rest, take a month, take two weeks, take six weeks, and find the smile of the Lord again.

Brethren, this is essential. And this is what's pleasing to the Lord. You see the real question they should have asked is an altogether different one. And that's the one we need to ask: "Is this for the Lord?"

Whether we fast or whether we don't fast, whether we do the ministry or don't do the ministry, whether we reach out or don't reach out, whether we involve ourselves in missions, we up our sacrificial giving, we don't up the sacrificial giving, whether we read our Bibles more this year, or be more disciplined in this thing, or attend the nursing home ministry more devotedly, or we give ourselves to a halfway house ministry...

Brethren, like I say, when we have a love for Christ, it's going to demonstrate itself. But brethren, from time to time, we've got to come – I call upon you, brethren, if you need to shut down all the stuff you've got going and all the ministries this week, and if for nothing else you take this week to pray and to fast, just to come back to your first love and to an intensified walk with the Lord, and brethren, that is the first thing we ought to be consumed with. Before you just get on this bandwagon to pray for this thing and the next thing, and to bring out our laundry list for the Lord, brethren, this is what's important. This is key – that we're doing it for the Lord. And may that permeate all that we're doing in the entire year, not just in this week ahead.

Brethren, I call you, please, I call you to pray and fast. Lay hold of the arm of your Father who sees in secret that he may reward you openly. The greatest open reward we could have is his greater manifest presence, the greater manifest working of his image in the very fabric of our beings, him drawing close, him making his smile real to us, him filling our hearts with appreciation, gratitude, him drawing close and making our hearts on fire with love for him.

Brethren, the greatest thing God could give us in this next twelve months is to just blow the embers of our hearts with the winds of the Holy Spirit, to cause our hearts to be impassioned in a way that we have never felt before. Brethren, that is the greatest thing. That is the most pleasing thing. Love, hot love for Christ is what makes God pleased. I guarantee it. That is what is pleasing to him. Brethren, may God help us.