

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 5-15-16 AM NOTES
“A CALL TO PRAYER AND FASTING”
JEREMIAH 33:3

The following study* defines “Christian” in very broad terms. Included in “Christian” is all who attend a church that identifies itself as Christian. Included would be evangelical churches (churches that share the Gospel and emphasize conversion), mainline protestant churches that aren’t evangelical, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox churches (such as Greek Orthodox). This study divides the population of our county into 4 categories:

“Christian” Dones—The “Dones” are the “dechurched” or “lapsed” religious people who are becoming fed up with the church and are leaving it.

Nones—The “Nones” are simply those that have no religious affiliation. They are not members or attendees of any religious organization.

World Religions—In Knox County, this group (with very few exceptions) is made up of Muslim, Jewish, Baha’i, and Hindu.

Active Christian—Those who attend a church that identifies itself as Christian.

1. Christian Dones—40.82%
2. Nones—39.34%
3. World Religions—0.53%
4. Active Christians—19.26%

“When man works, man works; when man prays, God works.”

—Hans Von Staden

- I. The Request (“Call to Me”)
 - A. The Simplicity of the Request
 - B. The Intensity of the Request

“Cry out to Me...”—the Knox Translation

Matthew 6:3a (NASB) “But when you give...”

Matthew 6:5a (NASB) “When you pray...”

Matthew 6:16 (NASB) “Whenever you fast...”

Nehemiah 1:4 (NASB) “When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was **fasting and praying** before the God of heaven.”

Acts 13:3 (NASB) “Then, when they had **fasted and prayed** and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”

Psalms 35:13b (NASB) “...I humbled my soul with fasting...”

Psalms 34:8a (NASB) “O taste and see that the Lord is good.”

“Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not...be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.” —Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

“We must get rid of the icicles that hang about our lips. We must ask the Lord to thaw the ice caves of our souls and to make our hearts like a furnace of fire heated seven times hotter. If our hearts do not burn within us, we may well question whether Jesus is with us. Those who are neither cold nor hot He has threatened to spew out of His mouth (Revelation 3:16). How can we expect His favor if we fall into a condition so obnoxious to Him?” —Charles Spurgeon

II. The Response (“and I will answer you”)

The greatest problem we deal with is not unanswered prayer; it is unoffered prayer.

III. The Result (“and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.”)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NASB) “¹¹ ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.’”

Esther 4:14b (NKJV) “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this?”

“The one concern of the Devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.”

—Samuel Chadwick

* Knox County, Tennessee: Evangelscape Profile by Dr. Curt Watke, Intercultural Institute for Contextual Ministry, 3-2-16

First Baptist Church Powell AM 5 15 2016
A Call to Prayer and Fasting
Non-Series Sermon
Jeremiah 33:3

Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know

Beginning today, and continuing through July 3, 2016, the elders of our church are calling the members to a focused time of prayer and fasting – 50 days. We have worked hard to provide you with materials that will assist you, but it must start with each member of this body committing to set aside an extraordinary amount of time to pray diligently and to periodically fast with the goal of seeing God begin to move in an extraordinary way to accomplish a work in this church that cannot be explained by programs, propaganda, or personalities.

For these 50 days we will be providing you with daily devotions, prayer requests, lengthier times of prayer in both the AM and PM services, and much more. There will be an emphasis on focusing together on the same biblical truths, the same requests, and hearing regularly what God is doing in answer to prayer.

For those who are on social media, there will be lots of things to inform and guide you over these 50 days. Out of these 50 days of prayer and fasting, we will be presenting to the church on August 14, the vision for the foreseeable future that we believe God has for us. During these 50 days, you will be given opportunities to share what God is doing in your life and in the lives of your family. If we will truly fast and pray, I can assure you that we will not be the same church after these 50 days.

In the rush to be *cool* and *hip*, we have all too often forsaken vital biblical elements of a church that has the supernatural touch of God upon it. Changes in methodology, technology, and programming never get at the real problem. The root problem is that we have forsaken a “God focus” and substituted a “man focus” that has cultivated a consumer mindset that is obsessed with giving the “customer” what he wants. During these 50 days of prayer and fasting, we are focusing on God and His plan for His church, the Bride of Christ, this church that the Lord Jesus “loved ... and gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). What He desires for His church is not all the latest impressive tech “bells and whistles” but a holy people who love Him with all their being; a compassionate people who love one another, and love the lost, and even in their sin, love them enough to go to them with the Gospel. What He desires for His church is a passion to “grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord”, and that doesn’t happen any other way than through a systematic preaching and teaching of God’s Word – expository teaching and preaching. That is *not* what the *consumers* are necessarily looking for, but that is what they need. The church that pleases God looks not to slick promotions to draw the unchurched, but to the Holy Spirit to draw them using the compassionate “invitations” of members to those they work with, go to school with, or live close to. The “experts” will tell us, “That methodology will no longer work,” but we are not dependent on a methodology, but on the Holy Spirit to draw people to Jesus.

I said earlier that this was not going to be a negative message that focused on all that is wrong with the church, and I plan to stick to that, but I do believe that it is important to take a look at the task we are facing here at home. I am going to give you some statistics that I suspect will shock some of you. I am grateful to the First Baptist Church of Concord who commissioned and paid for a study concerning the state of the church in Knox County, Tennessee, and then shared their findings free of charge with all the churches in our Knox County Baptist Association.

The population of Knox County is 428,561. We think of our county as being in the “buckle of the Bible Belt,” and in some ways it is. However, if you think this county is “churched” and that we should focus our discipleship efforts elsewhere, you may be shocked at what I am going to share with you.

The study that we are going to look at does not deal with membership, but with attendance (which gives us a far better picture of where we really are). This study defines “Christian” in much broader terms than we would. Included in *Christian* are all who attend a church that identifies itself as Christian. Included would be Evangelical churches (churches that share the Gospel and emphasize conversion), mainline protestant churches that aren’t evangelical, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox churches (it even includes the Metropolitan Community Church). I share that to say that our condition is really much worse than this report shows. This study divides the population of our county into 4 categories:

Christian Dones – The “Dones” are the “dechurched” or “lapsed” religious people who have become fed up with the church and are leaving it.

Nones – The “Nones” are simply those that have no religious affiliation. They are not attenders of any religious organization.

World Religions – In Knox County, this group (with very few exceptions) is made up of Muslim, Jewish, Baha’i, and Hindu.

Active Christian – Those who attend a church that identifies itself as Christian.

Here are the percentages of each of those four categories. [They don’t add up to exactly 100% because of some rounding off].

1. Christian Dones – 40.82%
2. Nones – 39.34%
3. World Religions – .53%
4. Active Christians – 19.26%

To round it off, about 40% of Knox County residents are church members somewhere, but they have had it with church and don’t have any plans to go back. About 40% are “Nones” who have no religious affiliation and the church is not even on their radar. About 20% of the population of Knox County residents attend Church at least some. The percentage of Evangelical Christians who attend is about 17% of the population of Knox County. Those numbers are shocking. It is worse than I thought.

We desperately need to see God do a work that only He can do. One man summarized well the hope we have amidst these shocking statistics. “When man works, man works; when man prays, God works.”

[Hans Von Staden, *Operation World*, page xii]

Are you beginning to see why we are calling for 50 days of prayer and fasting? The passage I want us to set our minds on is Jeremiah 33:3.

I. The Request (“Call to Me”)

Charles Spurgeon reminds us that “these words come directly from the lips of God.” What an invitation from the One who spoke the universe into existence – “Call to Me.” What startling words from God. Let’s analyze this invitation from God.

A. The Simplicity of the Request

We are not called to go through incantations, rituals, or formulas. With aching, hungry hearts we simply call to Him. That simple request rules some people out. For instance, it rules out the prideful and unbroken person. The essence of a prideful and unbroken person is to be independent and self-sufficient. Most of our prayers don’t get beyond the ceiling because we really, deep down often think we will try God, but if He doesn’t fix the problem the way we want Him to, we can handle it ourselves. A proud unbroken heart cannot effectively pray! Oh, it can mouth some words and impress an undiscerning listener, but God doesn’t hear the prayer coming from a proud self-focused heart asking Him to “help us a little.” God answers prayer that comes from a desperate, humble heart that looks to Him as the only hope.

B. The Intensity of the Request

The Hebrew word “call” carries the idea of crying out with passion. The Knox translation says, “Cry out to Me...” Prayer that goes beyond the ceiling must be *passionate and focused*. We’re not talking “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayers!

How do we “intensify” our prayers? I am convinced that the God appointed way to intensify our prayers is through fasting. While fasting is not commanded for those in Christ, it is assumed.

Jesus, in Matthew 6:3: “But when you give...”

He said in Matthew 6:5: “When you pray...”

He said in Matthew 6:16: “Whenever you fast...”

Fasting has the potential of turning ordinary, ineffective prayers into passionate, fervent, powerful prayers. Fasting is not complicated. It is the word for food or eating with a negative prefix. Basically, in the Bible to fast is to not eat for a spiritual purpose. Most all of the seventy-four uses of the word “fast” in Scripture are used in conjunction with prayer. For example, Nehemiah 1:4 says, “When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” Acts 13:3 says, “Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”

Let me be blunt. Fasting involves some physical discomfort. Many people live under a “gastronomical dictatorship” – our stomachs tend to rule us. We tend to be notorious for seeking to avoid pain at all costs. Most seek out the path of least resistance. That explains why that in most churches in America, fasting is about as popular as having a root canal.

What are some of the reasons given in Scripture for prayer combined with fasting?

First, prayer and fasting can be a means of humbling ourselves. We have already seen that prayer must come from a humble heart to be powerful. Psalms 35:13b: “I humbled my soul with fasting...” As we focus on these 50 days of prayer, adding fasting has the potential of humbling us and intensifying our prayers.

Second, fasting combined with prayer can make us more sensitive to God’s voice. In my life, the major benefit of fasting has been to increase my spiritual perception, and to hear God as He speaks through His Word. It is not that God speaks louder when we fast; it is that our spiritual hearing and discernment is sharpened.

Third, fasting enables us to bring our physical desires under the Spirit’s control. Fasting says to God, “More than my stomach wants food, my soul wants You.” Psalms 34:8a: “O taste and see that the Lord is good...” Fasting says, “Lord, I desire You even more than my physical food.”

For some of you, simply going without food for a day or more is not an option because of medical problems. We learn in Scripture that fasting can be broader than simply not eating any food for a period of time. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (who was a medical Doctor before he became a pastor) said, “Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not... be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.” [Dr.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, quoted in John Piper, *A Hunger for God*, page 19-20]

Perhaps for some, the fasting could be from all entertainment for several days. What would happen if for a week you spent the time that you normally spent on TV and downloaded movies in focused prayer? For others it may be fasting from certain foods, but because of blood sugar problems it would not include all food. I leave that to you and the Lord to determine.

Here is an important caution. You must not think of fasting as a way to “twist God’s arm” to get what we want. Fasting does not obligate God to do what we ask. Fasting is primarily to prepare our hearts to pray with passion and intensity. Charles Spurgeon says it better than I could.

We must get rid of the icicles that hang about our lips. We must ask the Lord to thaw the ice caves of our souls and to make our hearts like a furnace of fire heated seven times hotter. If our hearts do not burn within us, we may well question whether Jesus is with us. Those who are neither cold nor hot He has threatened to spew out of His mouth (Revelation 3:16). How can we expect His favor if we fall into a condition so obnoxious to Him?

[Charles Spurgeon, *2200 Quotations from the Writings of Charles Spurgeon*, page 151]

Fasting is one way to deal with a cold heart.

II. The Response (“and I will answer you”)

When we call on Him with simplicity and intensity and faith that what we are asking is in His will, we can expect Him to answer in His perfect timing. That is what verse 3 is saying! Satan cannot keep God from answering our prayers, so he focuses on keeping us from asking, or at least asking in faith. The greatest problem we deal with is not unanswered prayer; it is unoffered prayer! Let’s focus for a moment on what we are going to be praying for over these next 50 days. We are not asking God to make us materially prosperous or to keep us from painful things that He may choose to use as His instrument in conforming us to Christ. We are asking Him for things like visible fruit of people coming to Christ, families being put back together, the finances to meet the needs we have in the school, the facility needs, mission needs, and to fund outreach right here in our community. We are asking Him to renew those who have become cold at heart, unfaithful in their attendance and ministry, to give us a deep passion to reach the lost, a passion that we cannot ignore. Are these things we are asking for in His will? Yes, I am convinced that they are. We don’t always know the timing, but these are things that please God. We must pray in faith with a sense of expectancy that God is going to answer in His perfect time. Notice once again God’s response to our calling to Him – “and I will answer you.” We often make promises that we cannot keep, but God never does that because He is omnipotent!

III. The Result (“and I will tell you [show you, NKJV] great and mighty things, which you do not know.”)

In these 50 days of prayer and fasting, we are praying together in faith for certain things that we believe will honor God – visible fruit, a heart for the lost and hurting, families to be put back together, prodigals to repent and come home, etc. However, I believe that when we truly come before God praying in faith, and praying with intensity, we will see God show us things, tell us things that we don’t even have a clue about.

In Jeremiah 29:11-13, God is speaking not just to Jeremiah, but to the nation. Jeremiah 29:11-13: “For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”

Let me make application to this church. When we submit ourselves to Him and come before Him with humility and expectancy, He will show us some things that He desires to do in, with, and through us that we would never have asked for. He has plans for us that will astound us when He shows us what He desires to do through the people of this church. If I didn’t believe that, I would be longing to leave here. I’m getting old and I have no desire to waste the time I have left. I don’t want to miss out on the things that I know that God desires to do through this church, and I also don’t want to miss out on those “great and mighty things which we do not know.”

As Mordecai said to Esther in Esther 4:14b: (NKJV) “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this?” Perhaps God has something so amazing for this church that He has brought us to this place of 50 days of prayer and fasting for “such a time as this” to do through us “great and mighty things which we do not know.”

Conclusion

A Professor in a Christian school in the last century named Samuel Chadwick said, “The one concern of the Devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.” I long for us to be a church that makes the Devil tremble!