

Prayer and fasting

Psalm 51:17

"You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God."

Psalm 51 is the prayer of a truly repentant man. David comes before God empty handed, not appealing on the basis of the good he had previously done or will do in the future but to the nature of God. His mercy (not giving what our sins deserve), his unfailing love, his great compassion. He begins the prayer with a plea for right relationship with God as though this was all that mattered.

"Against you and you alone have I sinned."

"Oh give me back my joy again"

"Don't keep looking at my sins"

"Create in me a clean heart, O God"

"Don't banish me from your presence and don't take your Holy Spirit from me."

As you read this psalm you can see behind the words a broken man. He realises that formal religion, the offering of burnt offerings and sacrifices won't cut it with God. Religion will do nothing to restore intimate fellowship with our Heavenly Father. The only acceptable sacrifice is a broken spirit and a broken and repentant heart.

The fire of God falls on the acceptable sacrifice. The humble and repentant heart.

We may not all have committed adultery or murder, but **we need to have the same urgency and sense of crisis when it comes to being right with God**, no matter how we drift from God. We need to look up and see just how far we have drifted from shore! Even in the still waters, the steady, slow drift can lead us just as far from God as David was at this point in time.

When the storm comes, the waves start to rise, the skies darken and you ask "where is God?"

"Perhaps the question should be where am I?"

"How did I get here?"

"How do I get back, to solid ground?"

My lighthouse. You are the peace in my troubled sea.

Shining in the darkness, I will follow you. I will trust the promise that you will carry me safe to shore. You will lead us through the storms.

Because we drift, God continually has to draw us back to Himself. How far do we have to drift before we realise again our need of God? How wonderful it is when we regain fellowship with Him. When we find again the place of peace, where there isn't strife and self interest or anxiety.

Brokenness is a place where we have learned to trust God. It's also a place of great fruitfulness.

John 12:23-26 NLT

*Jesus replied, "Now the time has come for the Son of Man to enter into His glory. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many kernels - a plentiful harvest of new lives. Those who **love their life in this world** will lose it. Those who **care nothing for their life in this world** will keep it for eternity. Anyone who wants to be my disciple must follow me, because **my servants must be where I am**. And the Father will honour anyone who serves me."*

One seed. Has the potential in it to produce many more! Is Jesus just speaking of himself. No. You and I have the potential for great fruitfulness.

A few verses on, we read of Jesus celebrating the Passover Feast with His disciples.

John 13:1 *"When Jesus time had come,"* he did not lord it over people, but humbled himself. **He went as low as humanly possible** to show the extent of his love. A **love that serves** and goes to the lowest place, even to death.

The scripture tells us that Anyone who wants to follow Christ must follow where He takes them. Where to? He has made it so clear for us here. **We follow him out of a life lived for the love of the world into a life lived for Him.** We follow him to his death, a death to ourself in order to live for God.

We are all going to die one day of course but there is another death needed. We must **humble ourselves, die to self** and **serve as he did**. This is what pleases God, it's why we are here. As we die to self and lay our lives down for others there is an abundance of life and fruitfulness.

*"Anyone who wants to be my disciple must follow me, because **my servants must be where I am**."*

There is a clear choice. Do I live for myself and for this world or do I die to self and live for Christ?

We sang a song in last Sunday's prayer meeting that had the words **"captivate my heart"**. We need our hearts to be captivated by God. If we are not captivated by God we will most certainly be captivated by the world.

What we do, the decisions we make, our attitudes to others, the way we speak, **our lifestyle and priorities all reflect the reality of our heart and what has captivated us.** What is the true wellspring of our lives?

Our willingness to serve, to give financially, to pray, to spend devotional time, our attitude towards work or whatever else it might be; all reflect something of the inner life.

Paul, said **"as much as is in me, I, do not hesitate to preach to you."** Do you think Paul is talking merely about knowledge, or do you think, as I do, he is speaking about the truth and reality of God's inner working in his life?

God's word stitched into us so the we speak out of the reality of words that have transformed us.

King Saul was an impressive man, but he had a heart problem. Despite God revealing himself to Saul, he had a rebellious, unrepentant and proud heart. David however was far from perfect but he had a soft humble heart towards God. He was no wimp, yet he realised even from a young age, his need of God.

Today, as we continue our series "Back to basics" I want to consider a vital key in the Christian walk. It is one spoken about throughout the scriptures and our failure to use it may be one of the main sources of ineffectiveness in the Church today.

That being the case, I think you will agree, we need to know what the key is and to start using it. Can I also, just say how challenged I have been personally on this matter. I have had to repent of my lack in this area, but it also excites me when I consider the fruit that we shall see as we do this.

Matthew 6:5,6

"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

So Jesus is saying don't pray this way, but do it this way. He is teaching the disciples how to pray. Very practical instructions that carry a great promise! Would you agree the use of the word "when" in these verses suggests there is a clear expectation we will pray?

This however is not the key I want to talk about today, but it is very closely related and perhaps in many ways inseparable.

In the same chapter of Matthew's gospel **Matt 6:16,17** Jesus says this ***"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance (gloomy face). For they disfigure their faces (neglect their appearance), that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly I say to you, they have received their reward."***

But you, when you fast anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

So again, Jesus teaching on fasting uses the same method. Don't do it this way, but this way.

Again he uses the word "**when**" so what does that tell us. Not if, but when!

Jesus does not say that one is more important than the other. He is saying the practice of Prayer and of fasting are equally important.

What I can say is that if we realise the need to fast and fail to do it, that's no different from knowing the need to pray and failing to pray!

I love the verses that follow. Jesus immediately brings us back to the heart attitude. Why do we pray, why do we fast, why do we do good in giving to the poor and in our charitable acts? Not for the praise of men, for pride and honour for ourselves but because we love God and have been changed by him.

What is the purpose of fasting?

Would we expect our own children to do without food, just to make the point they really want something? So is fasting about twisting God's arm? Does God just want to make us miserable, because miserable people get their prayers answered?

Does God measure our fasts and say, "well I'm so impressed with him! Three days with no food and water! Let me see, that comes under the category of; Yup, raising the dead, healing multiple sick people and a badge of the highest honour!" I doubt that very much.

God is looking for individuals who's hearts are towards him. He Searches the whole earth for those who's hearts are toward him.

2 Chronicles 16:9 "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him."

Other translations say God **searches** for these **fully committed hearts** to strengthen such hearts.

Are we looking for recognition or are we able to do the hidden things, without hoping to be noticed by others?

Faith trusts that God sees everything, even the hidden things, or should I say especially the hidden things? and He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Isaiah 66:1,2

Thus says the Lord,

"Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

Where then is a house you could build for me?

And where is a place that I may rest?

For my hand made all these things,

Thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord.

"But this is the one I will look,

To him who is humble of spirit (or heart) and who trembles at My word."

It says in v1, God has already made everything. Does he need a house, a building, a construction of man? No! **He dwells everywhere, except where? Except in the hearts of those who are unwilling to give him room!** Proud, hard, unmoving stubborn hearts.

God has such high regard for each one of us, he has given us choice including the ability to choose to let him into our hearts or to exclude him. Isn't it amazing that the God who created everything and dwells everywhere should choose not to interfere with my will?

"I Stand at the door and knock....." He longs to commune with us.

But even more amazing is that God should also choose to dwell in our hearts if we let Him! This almighty God, living in me. Yet, even in hearts open to God we can still choose to limit Him.

"I'm not ready to give up this area...this far and no further.....etc" **Who do you think suffers loss if we limit access to God?**

Fasting is a God appointed way for us to humble ourselves. **God never promises to humble us, he will not make us humble!** What He does command, is that we humble ourselves. This is the invitation for God to take His place in our hearts.

Pride prevents us from receiving the blessings of God. It's been said that if pride can break out in heaven with Lucifer, how much more in the fallen nature, here on earth.

One of Donald Trumps recent quotes was "I went to the school of humility and came out on top!" Not much humility there, I fear.

Luke 14:11 Take the lowest place at the banquet. You may be exalted to a higher place, but you are not going to fall if you are already on the floor. All the blessings of God are found on the bottom shelf. You have to kneel down to get to them!

Phil 2:9 Jesus humbled himself. He made himself of no account whatever. Yet in due time He was exalted to the highest place. The way up is down. The lower you go the higher up you will end.

James 4:10 "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and He will exalt you."

Humbling ourselves is a great blessing and fasting is still a biblical way that we are to humble ourselves before God. It's not the only way, but it is an important way.

I will give some examples of fasting shortly but before I do, I think it is worth being clear about **what biblical fasting is.**

It is quite simply to deny yourself of food and a total fast would be the denial of both food and water.

There is no prescribed way of fasting in the bible. How you abstain and for how long is up to you. There are also those who cannot fast in this way for health reasons.

Personally, when I fast, I fast for a whole day and will drink just water or just hot drinks (Tea/coffee). I will do this either by missing all meals from breakfast to dinner or I will eat breakfast and go through until lunch the following day. If I do less than this, I don't personally feel I have denied myself, I end up just enjoying my evening meal more than usual!

But you have to decide for yourself and it is ultimately between you and God, not for me or anyone else to judge.

So let's look at some examples from scriptures.

Ps 35:13

"I humbled **my soul** with fasting."

Why do we need to humble the soul?

This is the **seat of our will, our intellect and our emotions** that expresses itself by saying "**I want, I think, I feel.**"

Guess what's really important? **God's will, His mind and His feelings.**

Ezra 8:21

He could have requested an escort but because he believed it was God's will and plan that they go to Jerusalem and because he had told the King that, He couldn't then deny Almighty God and rely on the King's protection. God's name was at stake, so he called a fast.

God answered their prayer and they were granted safe passage.

God's way works and it is very practical. Don't eat, but humble yourselves and see what God does.

1 Kings 21:22,25

Ahab was a wicked King who married the witch Jezebel, who led Israel into idolatry. God even saw his humility when he fasted and relented from judgement.

Jonah 3 He preached to wicked Ninevah and the whole city fasted even denying animals to eat. You can imagine the riotous noise as people and animals wailed to God. A notorious wicked city was spared through fasting.

Esther - Heman's plot to destroy God's people. She put her life at risk and called a fast. God miraculously turned Heman's plot onto himself. The turning point? Fasting and praying.

It's no wonder the devil wants to keep this key from us.

Acts 13 The beginning of the apostolic ministry.

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted. Turning from all activity, to humble themselves before God.

Did they sit down and work out a plan? No they humbled themselves realising they did not have the answer in themselves.

They had to hear God's strategy.

God is only committed to what he starts and he'll not start anything with the proud.

Fasted again before sending them on their way.

When the church grew, what did they do? They had to appoint elders in the churches. They did this through prayer and fasting Acts 14

This is God's way. His method, to seek out those who will humble themselves with fasting.

2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people, who are called by my name would humble themselves and pray.....

1. Humble ourselves (deal with pride)
2. Pray
3. Seek my face (pray God's favour, honour, glory etc)
4. Turn from wicked ways (If you don't think you have any wicked ways, you've not been in God's presence for long enough!)

God will do -

5. I will hear
6. Forgive their sin
7. Heal their land

Success to God is Humility, brokenness and fear of the Lord.

This all speaks of our personal walk with God, which is expressed in and through prayer.

The people who get the applause of heaven are those who have a humble and contrite heart. Who do not love their lives but are willing to give all for Christ. If you want to save your life you must lose it....

Revival must begin with a broken church before it can reach a broken world.

There needs to be a Laying down in sacrifice before the fire falls. A good Friday before a resurrection Sunday. There is a process of death before new life appears.

Prayer is not getting words out in a particular way, it's being real with God, expressing what's on our heart as we remain or abide in him.

"If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, you will ask....."

Where did Moses receive divine revelation from God?

In the presence of God, on Mt Sinai covered by clouds. He was given the laws, the patterns for the tabernacle, the furniture design etc.

If this is the case, **what do you think this reveals to us about the patterns and plans God has for our lives? Where do you think we will find them?**

Under cloud cover. In secret, in the presence of God as we humble ourselves before Him!

We will be mightily disappointed if we try to live Godly lives, with little or no reference to God and His pattern. But this is exactly what we do if we have prayerless lives. Israel wandered in circles and so do we.

Matt 6:18

".....and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

Jesus assures us that secret prayer is not fruitless: it's blessing will show itself in our life.

What a great promise to finish with!

Remember our Father **is**, and **sees** and **hears** in secret. We should be encouraged to go to the secret place in the knowledge that He knows what things we have need of, before we ask.

To know this promise, that God is very present in secret, that He sees and hears our secret devotion and promises to bless closets of believing people, fills us with a sense of privilege, joy and rest.

We come with our emptiness to Him who has all to give and who delights to do it. It's here we are daily anointed with fresh oil, where strength is renewed and we are filled again, that we may bless others with the blessing we have received.