

*Now there were at Antioch,
in the church that was there,
prophets and teachers:
Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger,
and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen
who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.
And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting,
the Holy Spirit said,
“Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul
for the work to which I have called them.”*

—ACTS 13:1-3

The state of the times extremely requires a fullness of the divine Spirit in ministers, and we ought to give ourselves no rest till we have obtained it. And in order to [do] this, I should think ministers, above all persons, ought to be much in secret prayer and fasting, and also much in praying and fasting one with another. It seems to me it would be becoming the circumstances of the present day, if ministers in a neighborhood would often meet together and spend days in fasting and fervent prayer among themselves, earnestly seeking for those extraordinary supplies of divine grace from heaven, that we need at this day.

—JONATHAN EDWARDS
*Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*¹

FASTING AND THE COURSE OF HISTORY

A Call for Discernment and Desire

It is dangerous to hold up a person or ministry or church as a model of fasting. As soon as we do, the clay feet will become plain. Disillusionment often follows naive admiration. There is none without sin, and all our triumphs are mixed with imperfections. We do well to temper our esteem with the acknowledgment that there are hidden faults in every saint, and today's victory is no assurance of tomorrow's holiness. Nor can we even read the heart behind today's triumph. Neither the heart of others nor our own (1 Corinthians 4:4). What's more, the moving stories that we hear about fasting have often passed through many minds and many mouths of fallible folks like us.

Let Your Exultation Be in the Word of God

All of this I say simply to caution us from transferring the root of our exultation from the historic *Word* of God written to the contemporary *work* of God reported. God alone never changes, but the outpourings of his blessings ebb and flow in ways far too

mysterious for our small minds to judge. The moment we think righteousness holds sway, some sinful plague is spreading in the midst. And just when we think the darkness is so thick that all is lost, someone grabs a rope that rings a bell and brings an army with torches. We will only maintain our stability and unshakable confidence if we keep our focus on the unchanging God and take every rising or receding tide as a work of infinite wisdom for the accomplishment of God's holy purposes.

Nevertheless, God ordains in his Word that we take heart from those who have known the grace of God before us. "[Do] not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. . . . Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Hebrews 6:12; 13:7). It would signal more pride in us than sin in them if we refused to be inspired and guided by ordinary saints who come into extraordinary blessings. So it is with fasting. The Bible and the history of the Church are strewn with stories of God's remarkable work in gracious response to the fasting and prayer of his people. These stories are not there to be ignored. Nor are they there as a panacea for every lukewarm season in the life of faith. Oh, how hasty we are to judge from God's mercy in the life of a fasting saint that this particular pattern of piety is the key to vital spiritual life!

Finney's Fasting and Imperfections

For example, many have read the story of Charles Finney's (1792-1875) conversion and his subsequent experience of fasting, and have taken it as a normative way of maintaining a revived state.

To the honor of God alone I will say a little of my own experience in this matter. I was powerfully converted on the

morning of the 10th of October. In the evening of the same day, and on the morning of the following day, I received overwhelming baptisms of the Holy Ghost, that went through me, as it seemed to me, body and soul. I immediately found myself endued with such power from on high that a few words dropped here and there to individuals were the means of their immediate conversion. My words seemed to fasten like barbed arrows in the souls of men. They cut like a sword. They broke the heart like a hammer. Multitudes can attest to this. Oftentimes a word dropped, without my remembering it, would fasten conviction, and often result in almost immediate conversion. Sometimes I would find myself, in a great measure, empty of this power. I would go out and visit, and find that I made no saving impression. I would exhort and pray, with the same result. *I would then set apart a day for private fasting and prayer, fearing that this power had departed from me, and would inquire anxiously after the reason of this apparent emptiness. After humbling myself, and crying out for help, the power would return upon me with all its freshness. This has been the experience of my life.*²

What shall we do with a testimony like this? Shall we conclude that repeated days of prayer and fasting are the key to continuous revival? Shall we discount its relevance for us because it was just one man's unique experience with God? Surely somewhere between these two extremes is the humble and sober answer. We are not so wise and experienced in the things of God that we cannot learn from another's fight of faith. God may indeed inspire us to set aside a day of fasting as we read this, and he may meet us there with great reviving power. But he may not. Others have sought and found awakening without fasting. Still others fasted and prayed for two, three, four or more weeks before a breakthrough came. It is a mistake to think that God's way with one of his children will be his way with all.

Another mistake we can make in admiring the work of God in the lives of fasting saints is to think that God's blessing implies his approval of their behavior and doctrine. But this is not necessarily the case. We find it difficult to imagine why God blesses a person's ministry if the doctrine is defective and if resilient sins infect the heart. But God seemed to be using Apollos, for example, who was "mighty in the Scriptures," but to whom Priscilla and Aquila had to "explain the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:24-26). And Jesus warns that in the judgment some will say, "Did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" But he will say to them, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22-23). In other words, the test of truth and righteousness is not whether there is power in a person's ministry.

Charles Finney, for example, held to a theology that was deeply at odds with his Calvinistic contemporary Asahel Nettleton (1812-1844). But both were used by God in evangelism.³ Similarly John Wesley (the Arminian) and George Whitefield (the Calvinist) were used by God to bring thousands of people into the kingdom of Christ. The inference from this should not be that doctrine is a matter of indifference. The long-term harm of holding false views of God and salvation is not nullified by short-term evidences of God's undeserved blessing. In fact, in the case of Finney, there is good evidence that he himself regretted some of his own spiritual tactics, if not his defective views of God's sovereignty.⁴ The remarkable fact is that God has his wise and sovereign purposes for using defective people and defective theology to save sinners. This is not a blessing on error, but a grace in spite of it. The banner over every blessing of God on defective lives and doctrine is Romans 2:4—do you not know that God's kindness and forbearance and patience are meant to lead you to repentance?

Therefore, no experience of fasting is sufficient to win our

imitation without other considerations coming into play. We will measure all by the Scriptures. We will not be swept away by the “successes” or “blessings” that accompany any particular pattern of spiritual discipline. We will realize that God is sovereign in dispensing his mercies: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion” (Exodus 33:19). And we will humble ourselves to learn from the experience of others, even those we may disagree with, since God has mercy and gives lessons in unlikely places.

Fasting and the Course of Korean History

With that caution, let us now observe, without fear of being carried away, that the course of history has been changed repeatedly through fasting and prayer. Many examples could be given. In the latter years of the twentieth century, fasting and prayer have almost become synonymous with the churches of South Korea. And there is good reason. The first Protestant church was planted in Korea in 1884. One hundred years later there were 30,000 churches. That’s an average of 300 new churches a year for 100 years. At the end of the twentieth century, evangelicals comprise about 30% of the population. God has used many means to do this great work. One of them is a recovery not just of dynamic prayer, but of fasting-prayer. For example, in the OMS (Overseas Missionary Society) churches alone more than 20,000 people have completed a forty-day fast—usually at one of their “prayer houses” in the mountains.⁵

For anyone who has a passion for the supremacy of God, such a story cannot pass without awakening some strong desires. Here at the end of the twentieth century most denominations in America are stagnant, with far less impact on our unbelieving culture than we long for. In Europe, the countries of the once blazing Reformation are now considered “post-Christian” and coldly

resistant to life-changing evangelism. How can we not stand up and ask: could it be that the Lord would appoint a new season of fasting and prayer as a way forward in our day?

Fasting and the Epoch-making Word at Antioch

One of the clearest biblical encouragements to consider fasting as a history-shaping act is found in Acts 13:1-4:

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

The situation is that Saul (Paul) and Barnabas and some of the other leaders in the church in Antioch were worshipping—"ministering to the Lord"—and fasting (verse 2). Judging by what happened we may assume, I think, that the burden they had as a leadership team in the church was this: "Where do we go from here as a church?" They were fasting to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in the direction of their mission. The upshot was more magnificent than any master planning effort the church has ever undertaken.

They were hungry enough for God's leading that they wanted to say it with the hunger of their bodies and not just the hunger of their hearts. "We want you and we want your leading, O God! O Holy Spirit, what is your will for the mission of this church? We want to see you and follow you more than we want to eat."

Questions the Bible Does Not Answer

One of the things that boggles my mind about planning efforts in the local church where I have served now for over seventeen years is that many of the questions we need to answer are not answered in the Bible, at least not directly. They are the kind of questions, I think, that the leaders in Antioch were facing: “Lord, shall we begin a world missions program? Should it be now? Should we send some of our own teachers as the first missionaries? Should it be Saul or Simeon or Niger or Lucius or Barnabas? Should we send two or three or four? Which way should we send them: by land or by sea? Should we fund them fully, or expect them to work for their keep, or hope that there will be ‘sons of peace’ in the towns where they go who will feed them? Should other churches join with us?” Etc., etc.

Most of the questions that church planning teams have to answer are of that kind. Where will we get the answers? I do not minimize the sound and basic teaching of the Bible that we should be “transformed by the renewing of [our] mind, that [we] may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” But this “proving” of the will of God in non-moral matters (should we send Saul and Barnabas or Lucius and Simeon?) is not a mechanical thing. Paul prayed earnestly that believers would “be filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will in all *spiritual wisdom* and understanding . . . and bear fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:9-10). It is a spiritual thing to discern which good works, of the 10,000 possible, are among the “every good work” that belong to my life and my church. Who of us can say that we have arrived when it comes to this matter of discerning best ministry decisions? And so I ask very earnestly: Do we have anything to learn from the fact that these deeply spiritual prophets and teachers worshiped and fasted as they sought the leading of the Lord?

Consider four simple observations from this story in Acts 13:1-4.

First, this fasting was *after* Christ's coming. I point this out lest someone say that fasting was a part of the Old Testament spirituality but not of New Testament spirituality. We have argued in Chapter One from Matthew 9:15 that Jesus expected that his disciples would fast when he had gone back to heaven. It is not surprising then to find them doing just that. Evidently Saul and Barnabas and the others in Antioch did not believe that fasting had passed like an old wineskin with the coming of the gospel and the new-covenant ministry of the Spirit.

Second, this fasting in Acts 13 was a corporate fast. At least five of them were united in this devotion to the Lord. I mention this because another concern with fasting is that Jesus warned against fasting to be seen by men (Matthew 6:17-18). He said, "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matthew 6:17-18). Yet it is impossible to fast corporately and not be seen by men. So the question is raised whether corporate fasting contradicts the teaching of Jesus. I argued in Chapter Three that it does not. And that is confirmed here by the practice of the apostle and church teachers. Saul and Barnabas evidently do not take Jesus to mean that corporate fasting is evil. The critical issue is not whether people know you are fasting but whether you want them to know so that you can bask in their admiration.

Third, this fasting in Acts 13 proved to be an occasion for the Spirit's special guidance. Verse 2 says, "And while they were ministering to the Lord and *fasting*, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had *fasted* and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." In reporting it this

way, Luke clearly wants us to see a connection between the worship, prayer, and fasting on the one hand and the decisive guidance of the Holy Spirit on the other: “While they were fasting, the Holy Spirit said.” This is a significant biblical precedent for engaging in worship-fasting-prayer in the earnest pursuit of God’s will for our lives and the life of our church.

Fourth, the fasting in Acts 13 changed the course of history. It is almost impossible to overstate the historical importance of that moment in the history of the world. Before this word from the Holy Spirit, there seems to have been no organized mission of the church beyond the eastern seacoast of the Mediterranean. Before this, Paul had made no missionary journeys westward to Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, or Spain. Before this Paul had not written any of his letters, which were all a result of his missionary travels, which began here.

This moment of prayer and fasting resulted in a missions movement that would catapult Christianity from obscurity into being the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries, and would yield 1.3 billion adherents of the Christian religion today, with a Christian witness in virtually every country of the world. And thirteen out of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament (Paul’s letters) were a result of the ministry that was launched in this historic moment of prayer and fasting.

So I think it is fair to say that God was pleased to make worship and prayer and fasting the launching pad for a mission that would change the course of world history. Is there a lesson here for us?

God Had Moved Through Fasting Many Times Before

It had happened before, and it would happen again and again in history. For example, in 2 Chronicles 20 the Moabites and

Ammonites and Meunites came against Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah. It was a terrifying horde of violent people coming against the people of the Lord. What could the people do? What direction should they turn? Verses 3-4 say, “Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord; and *proclaimed a fast* throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.”

So there was a great nationwide fast for divine guidance and deliverance. In the midst of that fasting assembly, according to verses 14-15, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel [the priest] . . . and he said, ‘Listen, all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: thus says the Lord to you, “Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s.”’” The next day when the people of Judah went out, they found that the people of Moab and Ammon had destroyed one another, and it took Judah three days to gather the spoil.

The course of history was changed by the fasting of God’s people. The stories of God’s mighty grace through fasting are many. We could tell the story of Moses on Mount Sinai fasting forty days as he received the Law of God that would not only guide Israel for more than 3,000 years, but would become the foundation of Western culture as we know it (Exodus 24:18; 34:28). Or we could tell the story of how the Jews fasted for Esther as she risked her life before King Ahasuerus and turned the plot against Israel back on Haman’s head (Esther 4:16). Or we could tell the story of Nehemiah’s fasting for the sake of his people and the city of God in ruins, so that King Artaxerxes granted him all the help he needed to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4). The course of history has been turned by many other factors besides fasting. I am not making any unique claims for this spiritual discipline. I only observe that

God, from time to time, has ordained that this be the means of changing the course of events for the good of his people.

A National Fast in Britain for Deliverance

And so it has continued after biblical times. John Wesley tells us in his journal of a similar kind of “biblical” deliverance in 1756. The king of Britain called for a day of solemn prayer and fasting because of a threatened invasion of the French. Wesley wrote,

The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquility.

Then in a footnote he added later, “Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.”⁶

The Rediscovery of Fasting in Our Own Day

There is in our own day a growing sense among many that the rediscovery of fasting as a penitential heart-cry to God for revival might be the means God would use to awaken and reform his church. Some have observed from Acts 13:1-4 there were three activities happening; these teachers and prophets were worshipping and praying and fasting. Of these three activities, two are experiencing worldwide resurgence in our day.

When we look around the world here at the end of the twentieth century, we see a remarkable worship awakening. Not all agree that the musical dimension of the awakening is an unmixed blessing either in lyrical quality or musical excellence. Nevertheless,

who can deny that there are thousands of churches and movements praising the Lord with vitality and God-centered focus who twenty-five years ago did not put nearly such a premium on engaging with God in worship as they do today? Not only that, there is an amazing movement of prayer in our day. David Bryant documents this movement in *The Hope at Hand*, showing with dozens of illustrations that “God is stirring up his people to pray specifically, increasingly, and persistently for world revival.”⁷

But of the three activities in Acts 13:1-4 (worship, prayer, and fasting), fasting has not had this kind of resurgence, except perhaps in a few places like South Korea. This has prompted some to ask: Might God not ordain that his fullest blessings will come to the church when we prevail in prayer with the intensity of fasting? That kind of intensification of prayer is what fasting is. It’s a physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence, “We hunger for you, O God, to come in power.” It’s a cry with our body, not just our soul: “I really mean it, Lord! This much, I hunger for you. I want the manifestation of you yourself more than I want food.”

*Jonathan Edwards’s Call for Fasting
in the First Great Awakening*

That this hunger for God should awaken a renewed interest in fasting is not new and not surprising. It has happened before at times of awakening. While the winds of the first Great Awakening in America were still blowing in 1742, Jonathan Edwards, its strongest defender and most penetrating analyst, longed for God to continue the blessing and increase it around the world. One of the means he commended was fasting:

The state of the times extremely requires a fullness of the divine Spirit in ministers, and we ought to give ourselves no

rest till we have obtained it. And in order to [do] this, I should think ministers, above all persons, ought to be much in secret prayer and fasting, and also much in praying and fasting one with another. It seems to me it would be becoming the circumstances of the present day, if ministers in a neighborhood would often meet together and spend days in fasting and fervent prayer among themselves, earnestly seeking for those extraordinary supplies of divine grace from heaven, that we need at this day.⁸

One thing more I would mention concerning fasting and prayer, wherein I think there has been a neglect in ministers; and that is that although they recommend and much insist on the duty of secret prayer, in their preaching; so little is said about secret fasting. It is a duty recommended by our Savior to his followers, just in like manner as secret prayer is. . . . Though I don't suppose that secret fasting is to be practiced in a stated manner and steady course as secret prayer, yet it seems to me 'tis a duty that all professing Christians should practice, and frequently practice. There are many occasions of both a spiritual and temporal nature that do properly require it; and there are many particular mercies that we desire for ourselves or friends that it would be proper, in this manner, to seek of God.⁹

I should think the people of God in this land, at such a time as this is, would be in the way of their duty to do three times so much at fasting and prayer as they do.¹⁰

In our own day, voices are rising with a similar call for fasting and prayer for revival. But not everyone is as thoughtful and biblically careful as Edwards was in his wrestling with the realities of revival, in view of the lessons of history, the freedom and sovereignty of God, and the authority of Scripture over subjective impressions.

Edwards's Cautions for Our Contemporary Calls to Fast

Edwards hoped that this Great Awakening would be the final great movement of God's Spirit around the world that would usher in the golden age of gospel triumph before the coming of Christ. He said, "'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind."¹¹ It was not to be. Edwards was mistaken. But Edwards's view of God's freedom and sovereignty did not allow him to predict the scope of the revival, nor the date of its arrival, nor its global extent. Neither did its failure to come in the way he hoped cause him to be disillusioned with God or to grow weary in the cause of Truth.

There were those in his own day who went beyond his own hopes and his more careful expressions of what may probably be. They spoke from private revelations and subjective impressions of God's Spirit. Concerning these impressions about the revival Edwards sounded a warning that is relevant for our day.

I would entreat the people of God to be very cautious how they give heed to such things. I have seen 'em fail in very many instances; and know by experience that impressions being made with great power, and upon the minds of true saints, yea, eminent saints; and presently after, yea, in the midst of, extraordinary exercises of grace and sweet communion with God, and attended with texts of scripture strongly impressed on the mind, are no sure signs of their being revelations from heaven: for I have known such impressions to fail, and prove vain by the event, in some instances attended with all these circumstances.¹²

What makes this warning so crucial is not only that subjective impressions are prevalent today regarding a possible com-

ing revival, but also that Acts 13:1-4 seems to give us a model for seeking God's leading that involves subjective impressions. Recall that verse 2 says, "And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, *the Holy Spirit said*, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" How did the Holy Spirit "say" this? Well, we don't know. But it was not the only instance in Acts where the Spirit gave such direct guidance. For example, in Acts 8:29 we read, "And *the Spirit said to Philip*, 'Go up and join this chariot.'" Acts 10:19 says, "And while Peter was reflecting on the vision, *the Spirit said to him*, 'Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them.'"

Are there guidelines in the New Testament to help us discern if such a claim to hear the Spirit in our own day is truly from the Lord? This is not a simple question of whether one embraces charismatic viewpoints or not. Even mainline evangelicals claim to be "impressed by the Spirit" or "have a sense of God's leading" or think "God has placed it on their heart" to do a thing. The question is, how shall we test such claims, especially when it may involve a prediction about a coming revival or a call for the church to fast?

How Do We Test Subjective Impressions?

I would suggest several guidelines. First, we observe that in Acts 13:2 the Spirit spoke to five teachers and prophets as a group. Of course, the Spirit could speak to one person alone. But it would seem wise to say, where more people are obliged by a word from the Spirit, more people are informed about it by the Spirit. It does not seem to be the way of the Spirit in the New Testament to bind the consciences of Christians through the subjective impressions given to others. Apostolic authority binds our conscience to complete obedience (Galatians 1:12; 1 Corinthians 14:37-38;

2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 2 Peter 3:1-2, 15-16). But other claims to divine leading must be “tested” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). This call for testing fits with the suggestion that where more people are obliged to follow, more people will be led to follow. It is not the solitary individual who constrains the body of Christ.

Second, the normative guidance in the New Testament follows the pattern of Romans 12:2, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” This need not rule out unusual impulses and impressions from the Lord, but it does suggest that the renewed “mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), shaped by the word of Christ, and permeated by the Spirit of Christ, will hold sway in the interplay of subjective impression vs. spiritual reflection.

Third, the claim to have an impression from the Lord would need to conform to the teaching of Scripture, either to specific texts if any is immediately relevant, or to the tenor, spirit, and trajectory of the whole.

Fourth, the misuse of Scripture to support otherwise biblical impressions will give sober Christians pause. Sometimes private revelation is claimed for a specific call of God to the church which is not unbiblical, but for which the Scriptures are pressed into service they were never meant to have. This is an unlikely thing for the Spirit to do. He inspired the Scriptures and would, it seems, handle them according to the meaning that he gave them in the first place. Therefore, where the claim is made that the Spirit brought such and such a text to mind that is then misused, it may be doubted that the Spirit’s leading is being accurately perceived.

Fifth, the larger track record of the person speaking is relevant. How accurately and helpfully has he or she discerned such impressions before? Has experience shown that God has entrusted this person with advance notice of his acts at other

times? How stable and reliable is the person in general? Is there a broad biblical doctrinal base from which the person may be expected to be discerning of true and false thoughts that compete in all our minds for conviction?

Testing the Use of 2 Chronicles 7:14

This is my effort to give heed to Edwards's exhortation that we "be very cautious" with subjective impressions in our own day. For example, we should be careful with predictions in our own day to the effect that America will experience a great spiritual awakening by any particular date. This kind of prediction, so often repeated in the history of the church, can lead to great disillusionment, if God has another plan. More relevant for our immediate concern is the danger that subjective impressions may also from time to time dictate to the church that this or that spiritual discipline, like fasting, is *the* biblical key to revival. Edwards cautioned us that "texts of Scripture strongly impressed on the mind" of "eminent saints" is no sure sign of the use of these texts being accurate.

One of the texts most commonly cited in the hope for imminent revival is 2 Chronicles 7:14, "[If] My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." Mistaken uses of this verse lessen our confidence in the predictions some make concerning a coming revival.

First, in the original context where God speaks these words to Solomon, the term "my people" refers to the people of Israel, and therefore the term "their land" refers to a land that is really "theirs" in the sense of God's giving it to them as a covenant blessing, namely, the land of Israel. But when we apply this text to our contemporary situation, "my people" would refer to the

Christian Church who cannot say, in whatever country that they reside, that this country is “their land.” The church has no land, the way Israel had a land. The Christian Church is a pilgrim people. We are aliens and exiles (1 Peter 2:11). Therefore, the proper application of 2 Chronicles 7:14 would, perhaps, be that, if the church will humble herself and pray and seek God’s face and turn from her wicked ways, God will incline to heal *the church*. But it goes beyond what this text assures if we say that any country where the Christian church humbles herself will experience a Great Awakening.

Another mistake would be to elevate any one spiritual discipline as *the* decisive key to such an awakening. Biblical and historical precedent would encourage us to seek revival and awakening and reformation through prayer and fasting. But that same precedent would discourage us from making any one spiritual activity the key that must unlock the awakening we seek. It would be especially misleading to attach fasting, for example, to 2 Chronicles 7:14 as a certain way of fulfilling this verse—for at least three reasons.

One reason is that 2 Chronicles 7:14 does not mention fasting. A second reason is that the further references in 2 Chronicles where God blesses those who humble themselves according to 2 Chronicles 7:14 do not all involve fasting (12:6-7, 12; 32:26; 33:12-13, 19; 34:27). This is not at all to deny that fasting would be a legitimate way to humble ourselves before the Lord, but simply to say that there is no biblical warrant for thinking that this verse is a call to fast. The third reason for not connecting fasting to 2 Chronicles 7:14 as the key to this verse is that it is possible to do extraordinary fasting and yet not humble ourselves, pray, seek God, and turn from wickedness. This is plain from numerous texts. For example:

When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence.

—Jeremiah 14:12

Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?”

—Zechariah 7:5

“Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and Thou dost not notice?” Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.

—Isaiah 58:3

The Ambiguity of Fasting

All of these passages are designed to caution us not to elevate any outward ritual, like fasting, to the level of a sure key to unlock revival. God is free to send revival with or without fasting. Jonathan Edwards longed for revival as much as anyone, and he called for prayer and fasting loud and clear. Yet he also discovered something profound in his own experience about the freedom of God’s sovereignty. He wrote,

How often we have mocked God with hypocritical pretenses of humiliation, as in our annual days of public fasting and other things, while instead of reforming, we only grew worse and worse; how dead a time it was everywhere before this work began. If we consider these things, we shall be most stupidly ungrateful, if we don’t acknowledge God’s visiting of us as he has done, as an instance of the glorious triumph of free and sovereign grace.¹³

His point here is that public fasting and other rigors had gone on for a long time, yet were full of pretense and deadness. The people were not “turning from their wicked ways” while they fasted. They were not “seeking God’s face” from the heart as they fasted. But suddenly, as the wind that blows where it wills (John 3:8), revival came. From this Edwards concludes that revival is “an instance of the glorious triumph of free and sovereign grace.” That is what it was then, and that is what it will be when and if it comes today. And may God grant that it come!

The Passion of Edwards and Brainerd

For all of Jonathan Edwards’s cautions about the misuse of subjective impressions in promoting fasting (or anything else), he had no hesitation in extolling the importance of it in the mission and ministry of the church. Besides the call to prayer and fasting quoted earlier, there is the long and painful account of his friend, the young missionary to the Indians, David Brainerd.

David Brainerd was born on April 20, 1718, in Haddam, Connecticut. That year John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards turned fourteen. Benjamin Franklin turned twelve and George Whitefield three. The Great Awakening was just over the horizon, and Brainerd would live through both waves of it in the mid-thirties and early forties, then die of tuberculosis in Jonathan Edwards’s house at the age of twenty-nine on October 9, 1747. Jonathan held this young man in such esteem that he took pains to preserve and edit his journals and diary. Here is where we see Brainerd’s and Edwards’s views of the importance of fasting.

For example, on the analogy of Acts 13:1-4, Brainerd sought the guidance of the Lord for his ministry through regular times of fasting.

Monday, April 19. I set apart this day for fasting and prayer to God for his grace, especially to prepare me for the work of the ministry, *to give me divine aid and direction in my preparations for that great work*, and in his own time to 'send me into his harvest'. Accordingly, in morning, endeavored to plead for the divine presence for the day, and not without some life. In the forenoon, I felt a power of intercession for precious immortal souls, for the advancement of the kingdom of my dear Lord and Savior in the world; and withal, a most sweet resignation, and even consolation and joy in the thoughts of suffering hardships, distresses, and even death itself, in the promotion of it; and had special enlargement in pleading for the enlightening and conversion of the poor heathen.¹⁴

For Edwards this use of fasting was not only praiseworthy for missionaries like Brainerd, but also for "ministers and private Christians." It was in fact the means of continual blessing in Brainerd's life and might be in our own as well.

His example and success with regard to one duty in special may be of great use to *both ministers and private Christians*; I mean, the duty of secret fasting. The reader has seen how much Mr. Brainerd recommends this duty, and how frequently he exercised himself in it; nor can it well have escaped observation how much he was owned and blessed in it, and of what great benefit it evidently was to his soul. Among all the many days he spent in secret fasting and prayer that he gives an account of in his diary, there is scarce an instance of one but what was either attended or soon followed with *apparent success and a remarkable blessing in special incomes and consolations of God's Spirit*; and very often before the day was ended.¹⁵

This is why Edwards pleaded with pastors and laypeople of his day to give themselves with triple diligence (see above) to the

discipline of prayer and fasting. It had proved for Brainerd and for hundreds of others in the history of the church to be a means of “remarkable blessing and . . . special incomes and consolations of God’s Spirit.” In other words, fasting had proved to be a pathway to awakening and revival.

A Plea for Pastors from a Puritan Shepard

One other illustration of this strong commitment to fasting as the pathway to vital Christianity comes from the century prior to Jonathan Edwards in New England. Thomas Shepard was born in England in 1605 and came to America in 1635. As a pastor in New England he preached a series of messages that was published as *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, which is significant because Jonathan Edwards quoted this book more than any other in writing his masterpiece called *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*. Cotton Mather, who lived from 1663 to 1727, preserved the stories of many early New England ministers including the life of Thomas Shepard. His recollections reveal some of the roots of Edwards’s deep commitment to fasting as part of the ministerial life and a pathway to revival. Mather invites us into Thomas Shepard’s study:

If we follow him unto his beloved study, there we shall find him affording yet a more notable and eminent instance of an holy walk. Here, besides his daily supplications, he did one thing which had a mighty tendency to keep his own spirit in an healthy, vigorous, thriving temper, and bringing down the manifold blessings of God upon all the weighty concerns, which he had in his hands; and a thing it was, without which he thought he could never prove either a watchful Christian or a very useful minister; this was *that he scarce permitted one month to pass him, without spending at least one day in the exercises of a secret-fast before the Lord*. It is remark-

able that every one of those three who are famous in the book of God for miraculous fasting [Moses, Elijah, Jesus], were honored by God with the miraculous feeding of other men. Our [Rev.] *Shepard thought that he should never do any great things in feeding of his flock, if he did not great things in fasting by himself.*¹⁶

Mather himself clearly endorses this commitment to fasting and longed for a great awakening in his own day. Interestingly Mather's eschatology was different from Edwards's, but both hoped and prayed and fasted for awakening. Edwards was a post-millennialist, and Mather was a premillennialist. Edwards prayed for a great awakening that would issue in a golden era of Christian dominance in the world before Christ's return. "Mather was convinced that Christ's imminent return would be preceded both by the extensive spiritual decline which he saw in New England, and European Protestantism, and by extraordinary outpourings of the Holy Spirit producing bright spots of revival and world missions, and especially the ingathering of Jewish converts."¹⁷

This is doubly encouraging today. It points the way across relatively minor doctrinal differences toward united prayer and fasting for the sake of the revival and reformation of God's people and the awakening of our spiritually dead American landscape. It even points the way to a common prayer-hope, even if we do not agree on the precise end-time scenario.

Most Encouraging of All

And perhaps most hopeful of all is this: Cotton Mather died in 1727 just before the winds of the first Great Awakening in America were about to blow. Richard Lovelace points out that Mather's hope for widespread awakening flagged just at the end of his life.¹⁸ If he could only have seen what a decade would

bring! May the Lord grant that our passion for God's supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples may not weaken, but only grow and intensify through fasting and prayer. And may God indeed raise up millions who are so hungry for him that they cannot but cry out from body and soul: "This much, O God, this much, we long for your fullness in the church and your glory in the world!"

*Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free,
And break every yoke?
Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry,
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.*

—ISAIAH 58:6-8

About a billion of the world's people live in conditions of absolute poverty without even the most basic resources available—no adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care. 400 million are severely malnourished, including more than 200 million children.

—LARRY LIBBY
*The Cry of the Poor*¹

FINDING GOD IN THE GARDEN OF PAIN

A Different Fast for the Sake of the Poor

One of the greatest preachers of the first thousand years of the Christian Church was John Chrysostom, the bishop of Constantinople in the fourth century. He has left us one of the most sweeping statements I know concerning the value of fasting. He was known as an ascetic in an age of luxury in Constantinople. His lifestyle offended the emperor Arcadius and his wife Eudoxia so much that he was eventually banished and died in A.D. 407. Chrysostom therefore embodied, it seems, not only the discipline of fasting but also the commitments to holy living that, as we will see in a moment, are an even greater fast than going without food.

Fasting is, as much as lies in us, an imitation of the angels, a contemning of things present, a school of prayer, a nourishment of the soul, a bridle of the mouth, an abatement of concupiscence: it mollifies rage, it appeases anger, it calms the tempests of nature, it excites reason, it clears the mind, it disburdens the flesh, it chases away night-pollutions, it frees from head-ache. By fasting, a man gets composed behaviour, free utterance of his tongue, right apprehensions of his mind.²

I take Chrysostom to mean that fasting has had these good effects on him and others from time to time, not that it always does, nor that it assists everyone with all these benefits. For example, for some people fasting will (at least temporarily) *cause* a headache rather than take it away. Nevertheless, thousands have heard the word of the Lord in Matthew 9:15 that “when the Bridegroom is taken away, then [his disciples] will fast,” and they have proven its immense spiritual value. The more you read in the history of fasting, the more varied appear the testimonies to its benefits. (See Appendix: “Fasting: Quotes and Experiences.”)

The Dangers of Fasting

However, what we have already seen, and will now see again, is that there is danger in fasting. I’m not referring to physical danger. You can avoid that if you follow simple guidelines.³ I am referring to spiritual dangers. It is possible to fast in a way that will be very displeasing to the Lord and spiritually destructive to yourself.

If you fast, for example, to be seen by other people, Jesus said, you have your reward from them, and you will not be answered by the Father (Matthew 6:16). To test our motives, he said that we should take steps not to be seen by others, but only by God: comb your hair, wash your face, and do not put on an oh-poor-me countenance. Then—if your motives are pure—your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Fasting and the Suffering of the City

But that is not the only warning about fasting in the Bible. The prophet Isaiah delivers a strong word that has tremendous relevance for our day. For me, as well as others, it has proved to be a very personal word. I live and minister in the city. I am sur-

rounded by the kind of human calamity that accumulates at urban centers. I live continually with the question of how my faith—including fasting—relates to these realities. Isaiah 58 has awakened in me, and many in my church, a passion to spend and be spent for the good of those in greatest need. It has functioned more than once to give us our bearings as a church when we ponder what it means to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things in the center of the city.

*Cry loudly, do not hold back;
Raise your voice like a trumpet,
And declare to My people their transgression,
And to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet they seek Me day by day,
and delight to know My ways,
As a nation that has done righteousness,
And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God.
They ask Me for just decisions,
They delight in the nearness of God.
“Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see?
Why have we humbled ourselves
and Thou dost not notice?”
Behold, on the day of your fast
you find your desire,
And drive hard all your workers.
Behold, you fast for contention and strife
and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today
to make your voice heard on high.
Is it a fast like this which I choose,
a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed,
And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast,
even an acceptable day to the LORD?*

*Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free,
And break every yoke?
Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry,
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am."
If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
And if you give yourself to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness,
And your gloom will become like midday.
And the LORD will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.
And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.*

Bill Leslie Discovers the Watered Garden

Those of us in my church are not the only ones who have heard a personal word from God in Isaiah 58. I recall a testimony from Bill Leslie, the former pastor of LaSalle Street Church in

Chicago, who had a long and remarkable ministry in the city, not unlike the one described in Isaiah 58. He came to Minneapolis once and told of a near breakdown that he had had and how a spiritual mentor directed him to this chapter. He said it was verse 11 that saved him from a dead-end street of exhaustion and burnout.

¹⁰*And if you give yourself to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness,
And your gloom will become like midday.*

¹¹*And the LORD will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places
[like urban Chicago]
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.*

What struck Pastor Leslie so powerfully was the fact that God promises to make us like a watered garden (not just a watering ministry, but a watered ministry). That is, we will receive the water we need for refreshment, and we will become a spring of water that does not fail—for others—for the demanding, exhausting, draining ministry of urban self-giving. This gave him a pattern of divine life that got him through his crisis and kept him going for years more. The amazing thing we need to see here is that Isaiah calls this experience of being watered as a garden for others a kind of fasting.

*Divide Your Bread with the Hungry
Even When You Have Cancer*

There is at least one other experience I have had with this text that makes it so personally compelling. Doug Nichols is presently

the president of Action International Ministries, a mission that focuses especially on the millions of street children in the big cities of the world. He is the kind of man who calls our church staff on the phone during an international crisis and suggests that we rent a jumbo jet and take a couple hundred of our people to Rwanda to help bury the dead so that doctors and nurses can do what they were sent to do. He is relentlessly focussed on pouring out his life for the helpless who need Christ.

For example, he writes to me every now and then, and almost always includes some sword thrust like this in a P.S. at the bottom of his letter: “In the last ‘one minute’ that it possibly took you to read this letter, 28 children died of malnutrition and diseases that could have been easily prevented. 1,667 die every hour, 40,000 children die daily! Please pray with ACTION for more missionaries to take the gospel to these children.”

Doug was found to have colon cancer in April of 1993. Doctors gave him a 30% chance of living after his surgery and colostomy and radiation treatments. During horrible civil war between the Hutus and the Tutsis, he got on a plane and went to Rwanda with a team of people, including some from our church. His non-Christian oncologist said he would die in Rwanda. Doug said that would be OK because he is going to heaven. The oncologist was distressed and called Doug’s surgeon to solicit help in restraining Doug from going to Rwanda. The surgeon, who is a Christian, said that Doug was ready to die and go to heaven.

When we got word here that Doug was going—with his cancer and his colostomy—to Rwanda, some of us on the staff gathered in the prayer room to pray for him. I recall being led very specifically to Isaiah 58:7-8, which we prayed for Doug.

*[Is the fast I choose] not to divide your bread with the hungry,
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;*

*And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery [your healing!] will speedily spring forth;*

We prayed very specifically that the feeding of the hungry and the housing of the homeless in Rwanda would not kill Doug Nichols, but would heal him. From Rwanda, Doug called his oncologist and said he was not dead. And when he got back he had a battery of tests that resulted in the assessment NED: no evidence of disease. God alone holds the future for Doug Nichols and his remarkable faith and ministry, but for now Isaiah 58 lives bodily in Doug's life as he pours himself out for the children.

So you can see that Isaiah 58 has some very significant associations in my life. The fasting that it calls for is no ordinary kind. And I am praying that the stories of its life-changing power will be multiplied through this book.

Jesus Loved This Prophet

There is something very close to Jesus' heart in Isaiah 58. You can hear it coming out in Jesus' words in Luke 4:18 ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden") and in Matthew 25:35 ("I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me") and John 7:38 ("He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water'"). The burden of Isaiah 58 pervades the ministry of Jesus—and more and more it should pervade our ministry as well.

Fasting as Veneer for Vice

In the first three verses, God brings an indictment against his people. He tells Isaiah to cry loudly and declare to the house of Jacob their sins. But their sins are cloaked with an amazing veneer of religious fervor. This is what is so stunning and sobering, especially for us who are religious and who practice religious disciplines like fasting. Listen to the indictment: “Yet they seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways, as [that is, as if they were] a nation that has done righteousness, and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God” (verse 2). In other words, they act as if they are a righteous and obedient nation. And they persuade themselves that they really want God and his ways. This is a terrible kind of delusion to live in.

He goes on near the end of verse 3: “They ask Me for just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God.” But they are not sincere. They want God to intervene for them with righteous judgments, because things are not going well, as we will see in a moment. But they do not see the real problem. They love to come to worship. They talk the language of the nearness of God. They may even have moving religious and aesthetic experiences in their efforts to draw near to God. But something is wrong.

Beware Loving Loving God Rather Than Loving God

This is a very relevant warning for us in a day of great worship renewal. Many people are discovering the joy of meeting God in extended times of emotionally charged singing to the Lord. I personally find such seasons of lingering before the Lord a very rich communion with him. But I see a danger. The danger is that we will subtly slip from loving God in these moments into loving loving God. That’s the way one of my colleagues put it recently. In other words, we begin to savor not the glory of

God but the atmosphere created by worship. When this happens we open ourselves to hypocrisy. And under the cloak of great religious fervor, deadly inconsistencies can emerge in our lives.

It All Looked So Good

Something is wrong in the worship of Isaiah 58. The people express their frustration in verse 3, but they don't know what is wrong. They say to God, "Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see? Why have we humbled [or afflicted] ourselves and Thou dost not notice?" In fact, verses 2 and 3 mention five religious activities they are doing in vain. In verse 2 it says (1) they are seeking God; (2) they delight to know God's ways; (3) they ask God for just decisions; and (4) they delight in the nearness of God. Then in verse 3, they are (5) fasting and afflicting themselves. Yet, in spite of all of that, God tells Isaiah, "Cry loudly [not softly, not quietly, but loudly] . . . and declare to my people their transgression" (verse 1).

They were fasting. They were seeking God's face. They were praying. They were doing a kind of external humbling of themselves. This all sounds just like what we are supposed to do, according to 2 Chronicles 7:14. Nevertheless, this fasting and this worship is not pleasing to the Lord. It is the kind of fasting and worship we do not want. And yet, we ask, what is wrong with seeking God, and delighting to know his ways, and asking him for just decisions, and delighting in his nearness, and fasting and humbling ourselves before him? What is wrong with that? It sounds like the very way we talk about worship at its best! Is that not sobering? Does that that not make us tremble? Does it not make us want to get so real with God that we could never be startled by the Lord in this way—with our most zealous religious practices and desires exposed as a sham?

What's wrong with their worship? God answers:

*Behold, on the day of your fast
you find your desire,
And drive hard all your workers.
Behold, you fast for contention and strife
and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today
to make your voice heard on high.
Is it a fast like this which I choose,
a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one's head like a reed,
And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast,
even an acceptable day to the LORD? (verses 3b-5)*

So here's the issue. The ethical, practical, relational accompaniments of fasting are the real test of the authenticity of the fasting. God lists the external religious forms of fasting: humbling or afflicting oneself (no food), bowing the head like a reed, spreading out sackcloth and ashes. Then he lists the (un)ethical accompaniments of fasting: you go after your own pleasure (in some other way besides eating), you drive hard all your workers; you become irritable or contentious and stir up strife; and you even go so far as to get into fights. And God asks, "Is this the fast that I choose?" The answer is No.

The Paradox of Self-indulgent Fasting

So here we have another test of whether fasting is authentic or not. Jesus said, If you are fasting to be seen by others you have your reward. Isaiah says, If your fasting leaves you self-indulgent in other areas, harsh toward your employees, irritable and contentious, then your fasting is not acceptable to God. So God is

mercifully warning us against the danger of substituting religious disciplines for righteous living.

Oh, how we need to ponder these things. Hypocrisy is a terrible blight on the worship of God. Let us take to heart the long-term implications for worship in our lives and in our churches. No worship—no preaching, no singing, no praying, no fasting, however intense or beautiful—that leaves us harsh with our workers on Monday, or contentious with our spouses at home, or self-indulgent in other areas of our lives, or angry enough to hit somebody, is true, God-pleasing worship. Don't make a mistake here: true fasting may be a God-blessed means of overcoming harshness at work, and contentiousness at home, and self-indulgence and anger. But if fasting ever becomes a religious cloak for minimizing those things and letting them go on and on, then it becomes hypocrisy and offensive to God.

Monday's Work Proves Sunday's Worship

How you treat people on Monday is the test of the authenticity of your fasting on Sunday. Fasting that leaves our daily lives unchanged in sin is the butt of God's ridicule: "Is it a fast like this . . . for bowing one's head like a reed?" (verse 5). In other words, the gestures of such fasting are no more spiritual than a bent reed in the swamp.

Woe to the fasting that leaves sin in our lives untouched. The only authentic fasting is fasting that includes a spiritual attack against our own sin. Is our fasting really a hunger for God? We test whether it is by whether we are hungering for our own holiness. To want God is to hate sin. For God is holy, and we cannot love God and love sin. Fasting that is not aimed at starving sin while feasting on God is self-deluded. It is not really God that we hunger for in such fasting. The hunger of fasting is a hunger

for God, and the test of that hunger is whether it includes a hunger for holiness.

Fasting Is Meant to Starve Sin, Not Us

If there is an unresolved pocket of sin in our life and we are fasting, instead, about something else, God is going to come to us and say, “The fast that I choose is for *that sin* to be starved to death.” The way he does that in Isaiah 58 is very striking. Isaiah says in verse 5 that they were fasting and “humbling themselves.” That word “humbling” also means “afflicting.” So they were afflicting themselves with hunger. But God says that this is not the fast he chooses. Then, in verse 10, he takes these very words “hungry” and “afflicted” and says that there are some hungry and afflicted people that he is indeed concerned about—namely, the ones who have no choice but to be hungry and afflicted, because the fasting folks oppress them instead of feeding them.

*And if you give yourself to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted . . .*

In other words, God says, your fasting and self-affliction is not really an attack on your own sin of injustice and hardness. If they were, your action would be to alleviate the hunger and affliction of your workers. There is a great irony here that God wants us to see. The poor are hungry and afflicted, verse 10 says. These well-to-do religious people are also hungry and afflicted—with fasting. But what are they fasting for? Is their fasting first a battle against their own sin—the sin of driving hard all their workers? The sin of putting a heavy yoke on the back of the poor? The sin of neglecting their clothing needs and housing needs? No. That is not what they are fasting against. Their behavior proves it.

So God comes to them and says, The fast that I choose is not that you religiously make yourselves hungry and afflicted, but that you make the poor less hungry and afflicted. If you want to fight sin by taking bread away from your own mouth, then put it in the mouth of the poor. Then we will see if you are really fasting for righteousness' sake.

When we are living in sin, the fast that God chooses is not a religious covering, but a direct frontal assault. For these people, fasting was not a fight against the besetting sin of their lives; it was a camouflage. If they make themselves hunger a little bit and afflict themselves a little bit, maybe it won't matter so much that they are indifferent to the hunger and the affliction of the poor. So God comes and says, I test your hearts. Go without bread for the sake of the poor. That's the fast I choose.

Consumerism and the American Inner-city Kid

Fasting in America and other prosperous western nations is almost incomprehensible because we are brainwashed by a consumer culture. We are taught to experience the good life by consuming, not by renouncing consumption. As Rodney Clapp puts it, "The consumer is schooled in insatiability. . . . The consumer is tutored that people basically consist of unmet needs that can be appeased by commodified goods and experiences. Accordingly, the consumer should think first and foremost of himself or herself and meeting his or her felt needs."⁴ That it might be more blessed to give rather than to receive (Acts 20:35) is almost inconceivable. Therefore fasting is barely thinkable except as a weight loss fad or a New-Age enhancement for higher consciousness—both of which are embedded in a consumer culture.

The pervasiveness of consumerism is manifest starkly when we realize how deeply it permeates all levels of society, even those that can scarcely afford to consume. The mark of consumer cul-

ture is the reduction of “being” to “having.” And this reduction is fed daily by television. Even in the inner city among the poor who cannot afford very much, teenagers

are connoisseurs of pop culture, ready receptacles for the jingles and scattershot imagery of television. Their speech is drenched in the verbal flotsam of television shows. . . . On the street, being a person of “substance” is defined ironically as having a certain appearance or image. . . . [One teenage boy] quickly quits his summer job bagging groceries when he realizes it threatens his image. He spends the first 75 dollars he earns from another job on a beeper, in part because it makes him look like a drug dealer [even though he has] nothing to do with drugs. . . . [He] also periodically carries a gun and peddles stolen merchandise: such acts prove that he is not a “wuss” but a person of “substance.” . . . [He] and his friends call themselves “LoLifes” (short for “Polo Lifes”) because they wear only Polo brand men’s clothing, most of it stolen from department stores downtown. . . . [He] believes that “clothes make the man.” Tragically, in his case, the maxim is chillingly accurate. . . . When the designer clothes are stripped away, we find virtually no substance behind the appearance. [He] has been reduced to a mere acquirer of goods and consumer of products. . . . [He and his friends] “trust what they have been told about image, status, competition, hierarchy, and the primacy of self-gratification. Their faith is lethal, mostly to themselves.”⁵

This inner-city kid and his friends are a stark portrayal of mainstream America, minus the softening effects of wealth.

Many mainstream Americans have an idolatrous faith in materialism, but it is tempered by the opportunities they have (educationally and vocationally) to build their identities on something other than their appearance. While they too are consumers, they have the opportunity to become

more than mere consumers. By contrast [our inner-city kid] and his friends cannot or will not access such opportunities. Consequently, “meaning” gets hollowed out of their world and replaced with “image.” In this shrunken existence, kids literally kill each other for gold chains and leather jackets. . . . The kids’ blind faith in consumerism is fatal.⁶

Against this backdrop of the pervasive contemporary American consumerism, the fasting of Isaiah 58 begins to have a sharper point. That a lifestyle of serving the poor rather than consuming another commodity should be called a “fast” is not so strange after all. Most of our life is a gorging of one artificially inflamed appetite after another. Any alteration of this pattern for the sake of ministry is a “fast”—and one that would please God more than a hundred skipped lunches with a view to more pizza at supper.

The Non-negotiable Living Fast of Love

What God does now in Isaiah 58:6-12 is describe what is involved in living out this fast and what the spectacular rewards are for living this way—that it really is more blessed to give than to receive, in ways we can’t even imagine from inside our consumer addictions. You recall that Jesus said, “Your heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Well, here are some of the kinds of things God promises for those who do this kind of fasting.

First look at the description of the fasting itself. Then we will look at the promises of God for those who live this way. Don’t make the mistake of thinking this is a job description that God had given his people to show them how to earn wages from him. There is no earning going on here. The God of Isaiah cannot be negotiated with. He is sovereign and free and gives graciously to those who trust him. Isaiah 30:15 says, “For thus the

Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.’” The strength to do what God calls us to do does not come from us. It comes from God, and it comes through trusting him.

This Fast Is the Doctor’s Prescription

When God tells the people what to do, this is not a job *description*, but a doctor’s *prescription*. He is not telling us to earn wages by laboring for a boss, but to get well by trusting our Physician. You can see this in verse 8 where it says, if you follow God’s word, “Your recovery [your healing!] will speedily spring forth.” If you trust the doctor and show your trust by obeying his instructions, you will get well from your sickness of sin. So don’t think that you are going to earn anything from God. That is impossible, and deadly to try. Trust his sovereign grace and follow his counsel, and you will be mightily blessed. But it will never occur to you to think that you have earned or merited anything.

So let’s look at God’s *prescription* here—the fast that God chooses. Beginning in verse 6:

*Is not this the fast I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
 To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free,
 And break every yoke?
Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry,
 And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
 And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

Then in verses 8 and 9a come the *promises* of what will happen if we trust the doctor’s prescription on how to fast. But

skip over that for a moment and go to the rest of the prescription in verse 9b-10a.

*If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger,
and speaking wickedness,
And if you give yourself to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted . . .*

That's the doctor's prescription. That's the fast that the doctor prescribes for the patient Israel, who is sick with the disease of hypocrisy and hardheartedness—and for the prosperous modern American who is sick with the addictions of consumerism.

There are thirteen components, but they seem to fall into seven categories. I take each of them as a personal call on my own life and as a mandate for the church. This is the fasting I must learn and enjoy. This is the remedy for the modern pseudo-freedom of unending commodity choices that clog my heart with things—like 30,000 products in the average American supermarket in 1996 as opposed to 9,000 in 1975, or one new periodical for every day of the year, or thirty TV stations to choose from each night.⁷

First, God prescribes that we set people free.

*To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free,
And break every yoke. . . . (verse 6)
If you remove the yoke from your midst . . . (verse 9)*

Bonds, bands, yoke, oppression, yoke, yoke . . . The point here is this: let us live to free people, not to burden them. Jesus said in Luke 11:46, “Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men

down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.” There is a burden and a yoke we should offer people, but it is a light burden and an easy yoke. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus calls us to join him in freeing people from heavy burdens and hard yokes.

What makes his burden light is the reality of the new birth that changes what we love to do, from the inside out (as 1 John 5:3-4 says): “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are *not burdensome*. For whatever is *born of God* overcomes the world.” Being born of God triumphs over the worldly cravings that make the commandments of God burdensome. Thus the prescribed fast begins with the new birth and yields new values and desires that bear fruit in freedom and joy. This is God’s prescribed fast.

I received an E-mail from a missionary friend in a restricted-access country whose presence there hangs in part on the “humanitarian assistance” he brings. But he is experiencing firsthand the necessity of prior spiritual transformation before humanitarian transformation can take hold. He writes,

In a nutshell, [the government] has decided to cut all funding for the business center and pump it into the “orphanage.” That sounds wonderful except for one thing. They’ve made the funding of the orphanage contingent on changing its clientele. They are demanding that the school be started not just for orphans, but run as an English school for orphans and a few “gifted” students who are not orphans. Of course, they want American “volunteers” to teach at this school. The few “gifted” students would just so happen to come from among the children of the very government officials who are provid-

ing the funding! Discouraging, isn't it? This is exactly the reason why reforming a culture must begin at the spiritual end (church-planting), not with "humanitarian assistance."

Second, God prescribes that we feed the hungry.

*Is [this fast] not to divide your bread
with the hungry? (verse 7a)*

Our fast is not merely to deny ourselves but to supply the needs of others. About 40,000 children a day die from hunger and from easily preventable childhood diseases. "About a billion of the world's people live in conditions of absolute poverty without even the most basic resources available—no adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care. . . . 400 million are severely malnourished—including more than 200 million children."⁸

These facts, plus the ones just outside my door, are relevant to how I fast. God will not allow me to content myself with severe discipline that does not attack the oblivion in which most comfortable middle-class Americans live. He says that fasting is meant to awaken us to the hunger of the world, not just our own hunger. And he says it is a heart-cry not just to savor the goodness of God in our own bounty, but in the power of love to live for the sake of others.

Do not be paralyzed by the statistics. We are not responsible for what we cannot do but for what we can do. And there are hundreds of do-able things for those who take their fast seriously. A simple example from Manila. "Smokey Mountain" is the well-known city of trash where Manila's garbage is dumped, and where 15,000 squatters and their families live by savaging the leftovers from the city.

Primary health care workers with Youth With a Mission (YWAM) began working at Smokey Mountain in 1985 and

found, tragically, that families often lost young children to measles. Working with the local health authorities, an immunization clinic began in Smokey Mountain in 1986. The first Wednesday of every month became known as child immunization day at the YWAM multi-purpose center. The children received immunizations free of charge for tetanus, typhoid, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, measles, and B.C.G. (tuberculosis). Families would congregate outside the green cinder-block building as workers weighed the children and administered the shots and liquid drops. It was making a difference. In 1986, the primary health care workers there noted over 45 child deaths due to measles. In 1987, there were only 18 recorded deaths. In 1988, there were no known deaths due to measles, infections, or complications. Immunizations clearly made a difference and offered hope for the squatter community.⁹

Third, God prescribes that we house the homeless.

*And bring the homeless poor
into the house. (verse 7b)*

We are often hindered from ministering to the homeless by fear and by the mindset that the government has programs for this sort of thing. The promises of God (which we will see in a moment) should shatter fear. And the fact that the government is willing to help should not control our labors of love. There are structural and spontaneous ways to minister to the poor. Spontaneously we take risks and don't worry that the long-term effects may be small. Love does not calculate that way. The good Samaritan did not say, "One interrupted day will make very little difference in the problem of chronic violence in this region." He saw this one need and did something. So it is with many who see the homeless and perform their fast.

It was a bitterly cold December in Oregon. A piercing east wind sent Portlanders scurrying from warm office buildings into the shelter of their cars for the evening commute. But Les and Kathy couldn't help noticing the men and women who had no warm home waiting for them—who had no home at all. . . . Up came the deflector shields. Well, they rationalized, there were missions and those sorts of groups around that were supposed to be helping. They were the “professionals.” . . . But “they” weren't getting the job done. There were still people on the streets—in full view of Les and Kathy on their way home from work—who were suffering in the sub-freezing temperature. Real people feeling real pain. They had even seen one woman with no shoes. . . . “We talked about it,” Kathy recalled. “And we realized that we had three extra sleeping bags, more blankets than we needed, and a drawer full of gloves. We said, ‘That's something we can do,’ so we did it. We went downtown and handed the stuff out” . . . Did they sell all they had? No. . . . Did they switch careers and devote full time to street people? No. . . . They simply saw a need at their “front gate,” realized they could help, and responded.¹⁰

I am aware that what the text actually says is, “bring the homeless poor into the house.” And I do believe that the more relational our care for the poor can be, the better. But it would be wooden and unchristlike to say that all care short of bringing the homeless into our own home is hypocritical. That may be what we should do in some cases, but not necessarily in all. And it is often an all-or-nothing attitude that paralyzes God's people.

And as I said, there are structural ways to do this different fasting for the poor, as well as spontaneous individual ways. The closest illustration at hand is a few blocks from my home, a ministry called Masterworks, created by Tim Glader to help the chronically unemployed in our neighborhood to develop skills, discipline, and hope by working, for example, in simple assembly

routines and meeting in Christian discipleship relationships. Tim sold his suburban heating and air-conditioning service company to start the inner-city business in 1991. He also moved into the city with his wife and kids. Our church makes the building available, and Tim does everything else. His aim is to magnify the greatness of Christ's love and power by offering almost-unemployable people secure, full-time jobs that help develop job skills while also providing the support necessary to prepare workers for the jump from welfare to self-sufficiency. This venture has been for Tim and his family no small "fast." How much easier and more secure and comfortable would have been the "feast" of plenty without having to worry with the existence of the poor.

Fourth, God prescribes that we clothe the naked.

*When you see the naked,
to cover him . . . (verse 7c)*

Fifth, he prescribes that we be sympathetic, that we feel what others feel because we have the same flesh they do.

*And not to hide yourself
from your own flesh . . . (verse 7d)*

The thought seems to be the same as Hebrews 13:3, "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body." You have the same flesh they do. So put yourself in their place and feel what they feel. One of the implications of this would seem to be that we not seal ourselves off from the places of trouble and misery. Out of sight usually means out of mind. And out of mind usually means out of heart. All of us know that one trip to the streets of Calcutta does more to change our values and priorities than many statistics. And living in the city or moving closer

to the manifest needs of the poor will help keep that exposure from being a mere spasmodic experience of compassion. It is no guarantee. One can become callous anywhere. And one can do great good from afar. But the fast God prescribes includes this: don't hide from your fellow humans who are in need.

Sixth, God prescribes that we put away gestures and words that show raw contempt for other people.

*Remove . . . the pointing of the finger
and speaking wickedness . . . (verse 9)*

Literally the Hebrew means the “sending” of the finger, which may be a lot closer to our crude “giving someone the finger” than it is to merely pointing at someone. So don't gesture and don't speak in ways that show callous contempt for others. Oh, how easy it is to become fed up with the arrogant poor! The fast God prescribes for us is to renounce such an attitude and go without it. This is not easy. I used to think that living among the poor would sensitize us to the need and break our hearts. It is not that simple. It can have exactly the opposite effect. It can make you hard and caustic and jaundiced. The pleasures of “eating” such cynicism are tragically sweet. From this we must fast.

Finally, the Lord prescribes that we not just give *food*, but give *ourselves*—our souls—and not just to satisfy the stomach of the poor, but the soul of the afflicted.

*And if you give yourself [soul] to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire [soul] of the afflicted . . . (verse 10)*

The correspondence between giving our own “soul” and satisfying the “soul” of the afflicted is not evident in the English translation. But in Hebrew the same word is used in both parts of the verse. The ministry is soul to soul. One of the newer efforts

of our church in the city is a partnership with an urban ministry called InnerChange. One of the great emphases that we are learning in this partnership is that ministry to the poor is not merely giving things. It is giving self. It's not just relief. It's relationship. That is an essential part of God's fasting prescription in Isaiah 58.

The All-satisfying Promises of God

Now, if we trust God, our Great Physician, enough to follow him in this prescribed seven-point fast, what will happen in our lives and in our churches? Again there are seven categories of promises—rewards from the Father who sees our fasting. They do not necessarily correspond one to one with the previous categories of prescriptions. But taken together they portray a life that many of us are longing for. O, that we would not be put off by the paradox that pouring out our lives is the way to fullness. God would give us himself, but he would have us know that he satisfies most fully when he is shared most freely.

The first promise is that the darkness in your life will become light.

Then your light will break out like the dawn. (verse 8)

Then your light will rise in darkness,

And your gloom will become like midday. (verse 10)

It is one of God's many paradoxes that there is more light in the dark places of the world for those who go there to serve. And there is more darkness in the glitz of the great malls for those who go there to escape. Jesus is the Light of the world. Living near him is the brightest place in the universe. To find out where he lives, read the Gospels and follow his path.

How's the gloom factor in your life? Are *you* gloomy? Is your church gloomy? Is your Sunday school class gloomy? Is your

small group under a cloud of gloom? Maybe you should stand up and say, “If there’s a cast of gloom over us, maybe we should find some project for the hungry.” That’s what this text says. If you want the clouds to roll back, start pouring out your life for other people. Maybe you’re way too ingrown as a person, or a church or a small group or a family. Maybe your family has become so self-focused, nobody ever comes over. You don’t know any of your neighbors. There’s no family ministry. And you wonder why there’s a cloud over the family. Take this promise, and pray hard about the gloom and light factor in your life, and see whether there’s a prescription here for you—not a job description to earn anything, but a doctor’s prescription from a Physician who loves you and wants you free from gloom. He wants light on you, and he knows the path that leads to brightness.

Second, God promises that he will give you physical strengthening.

And your recovery will speedily spring forth. . . . (verse 8)

And [he will] give strength to your bones. . . . (verse 11)

Who knows how much weakness is in us individually and in the church corporately because we are not pouring our energy into the weakness of others? We spend our evenings watching television because we are too tired to do anything else. Perhaps. However, God promises strength not only from restful evenings alone, but from fasting from things like television in order to take a meal to the family overwhelmed with medical crises. There is a spiritual dynamic here that we do not understand until we experience it. We are made to mediate the glory of God’s grace to others. For this there is strength when we think that all is spent.

Third, God will be in front of us and behind us and in the midst of us with righteousness and glory.

*And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. (verse 8)*

So God will be in front of you with righteousness and behind you with his glory. And not only that, but he will be there when you call.

*Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am." (verse 9)*

Whenever you call the roll of helpers, God always says, "Here!" When we are busy doing what his Son did, namely, "becoming poor that others might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9), and doing it "in the power that God supplies" (1 Peter 4:11), then God moves in behind us and in front of us and surrounds us with omnipotent love and help and protection and care.

For years I have argued that prayer is meant by God to be a wartime walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom. God intends for us to call on him to help us because we are giving our lives to spread a passion for his supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples. Prayer is not for the enhancement of our comforts but for the advancement of Christ's kingdom. When Isaiah 58:9 says, "*Then* you will call, and the Lord will answer," "then" refers back to verse 7. When? "Then"—namely, when you join the forces of love to minister to those without food, shelter, and clothing. This is *when* the Lord will hear the wartime walkie-talkie and answer. He has very special frequencies apportioned to the territories of high-risk love.

This does not mean that you can't pray for your child to be healed from a sore throat or for your car not to break down. But it does mean that if you don't have God-exalting, kingdom-advancing reasons for those kinds of prayers, they will lead even-

tually to a malfunction of the walkie-talkie. Nor does it mean that there is no place for prayerful lingering with God in the communion of praise and fellowship. But it does mean that the consummation of joy in communion with God is a shared joy. And praise that is not tending toward the inclusion of others will spoil.

Fourth, God promises to guide us continually.

*And the Lord will continually
guide you. (verse 11)*

Oh, what a precious promise this is for us in the perplexities of life and ministry! I wonder how much confusion and uncertainty in our lives comes from the neglect of ministry to the poor? It seems the Lord gives his most intimate guidance to those bent on giving themselves to the needs of others—especially the poor. The guidance of God is not meant for the bright paths of the garden of ease, but for the dark places of pain where we have few answers and paths have never been cut. How many times in the pastoral ministry have I been called to come to a crisis, and as I go I say, “Lord, I don’t know what the solution is here. Help me. Please grant me your guidance. Bring to my mind what would be most helpful.” Again and again he has answered. Make yourself available, even for situations of need beyond your ability, and “the Lord will continually guide you.”

Fifth, he will satisfy your soul.

*And [he will] satisfy your desire [your soul]
in scorched places. (verse 11)*

Our souls are meant to be satisfied in God. But we have learned again and again that this satisfaction in God comes to consummation when we extend our satisfaction in him to others. Pouring ourselves out for the poor is the path of deepest sat-

isfaction. And note that this will come “in scorched places.” In other words, in the service of others, your soul will become less and less dependent on external circumstances for satisfaction. More and more you will be able to say with the psalmist in Psalm 73:25-26:

*Whom have I in heaven but Thee?
And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

Sixth, God will make you a watered garden with springs that do not fail.

*And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. (verse 11)*

This was the verse that wakened Bill Leslie to the preciousness of the “fast” of Isaiah 58. He, along with many pastors, was going through a dry season. But there in one verse was what we all need and want—both being watered and the power to water others: “a watered garden” and “a spring of water.” It is a paradoxical spiritual principle in Scripture: as you pour yourself out, you become full. As you give away, you get more.

But there is an assumption that the well has been dug and is being kept unclogged. We can only stay green and useful for others if there is, as it were, a spring in our soul. And what is that? This promise comes to its fulfillment in the New Testament through what Jesus revealed in John 7:38, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water’ [a spring of waters that does not fail]. But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive.” In other words, trusting in Jesus for all we need is the opening of the spring of the Spirit’s power. And he bestirs

himself most fully when, by faith, we spend ourselves in the path of love for the sake of the perishing and the poor.

Finally, if we give ourselves to the poor, God will restore the ruins of his city—and his people.

*And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to dwell. (verse 12)*

How many ruined things may be repaired by the fasting of God's people for the sake of the poor! Who knows what miseries, what dysfunctions, what breaches, what afflictions and oppressions may be healed and restored by the beautiful fasting of Isaiah 58! Ours is not to predict what the city or the church or the family or society might look like. Ours is to trust and obey.

So let us trust the Great Physician, the Lord, our healer. Let us accept the fast that he has prescribed for us. It will mean light and healing and guidance and refreshment and restoration and resourcefulness—and all of this with God himself before us, and behind us, and in the midst of us. And since it is by our good deeds that people will see our light and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16), then this fast too will spread the gospel of the kingdom and hasten the day of the Lord. If we are truly hungry for all the fullness of God, here is a fasting that will fill.