

January 5, 2014

## **Prayer And Fasting Redux Igniting a Passion to Pray**

**Daniel 9:1 – 19**

At the beginning of this new year, we are going to take this first month to concentrate on an entirely topical series we are calling 'Prayer and Fasting Redux'. Redux is a Latin word that means, 'brought back' or 'revisited'; and the intent is to revisit, and bring back, as it were, the often-neglected Christian discipline of prayer and fasting here at Summit. My goal is to stimulate us to prayer and fasting – to encourage us to fast and pray – to stir up a passion in our souls to say with our mouths and with our bodies, 'This much O Lord we want to see You magnified in the world and in our lives'. I am trusting God to fill our hearts and minds with a determination not to be content with a little prayer here and there, but to inspire us with a holy ambition to fast and pray to see His kingdom come and His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

There is this great scene in the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ where the apostle John gets a ringside seat to the very throne room of God in heaven. And in chapter eight John tells us: *When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.* Revelation 8:1 This fact alone tells us that what is about to happen is hugely momentous. Heaven has never been silent before that we know about. There is at the very least the 24-7, three hundred and sixty five days a year chorus of the four living creatures who are around the throne crying, *'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come'*. Revelation 4:8b So a half-hour of silence is significant.

And then he describes the seven angels who are given seven trumpets. But before they can blow their trumpets, something else needs to happen, and that something has to do with the prayers of the saints. *And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.* Revelation 8:3-4 Figuratively, in the Bible, incense was symbolic of ascending prayer. And here we have incense given to the angel to add with the prayers of the saints. I can only conclude that all of heaven is praying even as we are praying on earth – *'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done'* and it is that incense that mingles with the prayers of the saints in the angel's golden bowl.

And the answer to that mingled prayer comes in a spectacular fashion: *Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.* Revelation 8:5 I believe that what we are to understand from this is that our prayers that are an echo of heaven's own cry, work to accomplish the purpose of God. When we pray, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' that is not just a catch-phrase, that is not a Christian mantra – that is the cry of heaven and the prayer of God's people that gets mingled together and mixed with fire from the altar and things happen to impose God's will and God's kingdom on earth.

However, there is another element to prayer that is often overlooked or simply neglected and that is the discipline of fasting. While we may pray at times and not fast – the opposite never seems to be an option in the Bible – that is, fasting without praying. The two are inextricably linked and the people of God are often found praying and fasting. It seems as though fasting adds an element of urgency and critical need to the prayers of the saints that prompts heaven to answer. In Acts chapter 13, we saw the church in Jerusalem praying and fasting at a critical time in the ministry that resulted in a missions movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries, and would result in over a billion people who call themselves Christians today and a Christian witness in virtually every country of the world.

Prayer and fasting marked a turning point for the nation of Assyria in the Old Testament. When Jonah carried God's warning of impending judgment to Nineveh, the Scripture records: *The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.*

*And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it. Jonah 3:6-10*

In the book of Nehemiah we read that Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king Artaxerxes, was brought a report concerning those who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the nation were in trouble: *"The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."* And Nehemiah's response was to fast and pray: *As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.* Nehemiah 1:3-4 God answered his prayers and fastings by moving Artaxerxes heart to send him with all the material help and support he needed to rectify the situation – and the history of a nation turned on prayer and fasting. There are so many examples of this in the Bible, not only in Daniel, and Acts, and Nehemiah, but in Ezra, and Esther, and the Chronicles – where prayer and fasting are instrumental in turning the course of nations.

And so we come to Daniel: *In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans-- in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking Him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.* Daniel 9:1-3 Daniel had been in the word and had probably read this passage many times before, but at this moment it seemed to leap out at him: *I... perceived in the books the number of years that... must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.* And his response was to pray and fast for the accomplishing of God's will. He didn't say, 'Oh, seventy years is about up – I guess I'll wait to see if it happens'. No, he prayed for it – he fasted for it. He said with his heart, and he said with his body, 'Lord, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!'

The situation in Daniel's time was that the people of God were held captive by a foreign, godless power because they had forsaken God and turned away from Him as a nation. Daniel mentions this in verse 11 and again in verse 13 of His prayer: *All Israel has transgressed Your law and turned aside, refusing to obey Your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against Him...As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by Your truth.* I would say we have a similar situation in the church today.

It is tempting to apply this to the state of our nation today, and I do believe we can. However, the rapid slide into moral and spiritual decadence in our nation has happened in full view of the church in America – and it is the church, the people of God, that bears the responsibility. In 1520, Martin Luther wrote a treatise which he called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he compared the Jewish captivity centuries earlier to the condition of the church in his day. He maintained that the church had been invaded by powers foreign to Christ and His word that had captured the hearts and minds of the people and the church was in a kind of Babylonian bondage.

And I believe that is the situation in much of the church today. Materialism, moral relativism and moral failure, preaching that focuses on health, wealth, and success, messages designed to make you feel good, concern over political correctness, and a post-modern mindset that echoes what the world says all have crept into the church and captured the minds and hearts of God's people. A large majority of the church-goers today think the way the world thinks and acts the way the world acts, and viewed from outside – there seems to be no difference. In its headlong pursuit to be relevant – the church has lost its savor and really doesn't impact the culture around it the way perhaps it once did.

Several times Daniel mentions a deep sense of shame that the people of God feel because of their condition: *To You, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which You have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against You. To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against You.* Daniel 9:7-8

And I would say that in the church, all those who have not embraced the world into the church, who consciously fight against its influence in their homes and lives and churches, nevertheless feel this shame because we know the church ought to be different. Because we know that the church ought to be living as strangers and aliens, citizens of heaven, not of earth – because we do not pray as we once did in our schools or read and teach God's word there, and the church did not stand up and fight the godless forces that made those changes – because divorce is as common in the church as out of it – because abortion has been institutionalized in our society and many Christians think it is okay – because homosexuality is a choice and a lifestyle and not a sin and has been welcomed into many congregations – because of this, because it is not just society at large that embraces this but increasingly the church – we have a deep sense of shame.

As a result, the people of God in Daniel's day had become a byword and God was mocked: *because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a byword among all who are around us.* Daniel 9:16b A byword is a disparaging or abusive word or phrase or even a proverb that speaks scornfully or reproachfully about someone or something. It meant that the nations looked at Israel and laughed at God – they mocked Israel's God. I believe that is the way it is with the church and the world today. Just watch any Hollywood movie or network television production that includes a pastor, priest or some reference to the church and what you get is derision and scorn and mocking. And that in large part is due to the church's wandering away from the clear teaching of the word on sin and righteousness; and the fact that the church no longer reflects the glory of the Lord because it reflects the world. We have made the name of Christ an object of scorn.

So what shall we do? I believe we should do what the people of God have always done when they have sought to hear from God and turn the tide of history – we should fast and pray. Prayer with fasting says to God 'This much, O Lord we want to hear from heaven. This much O Lord, we want to see Your mighty hand move in our lives and in the world around us – to see Your kingdom come and Your will be done – right here, right now!' I believe that if the church of God sets herself to regular times of prayer and fasting we will see God move in ways we never imagined – in our lives, in the lives of those for whom we pray – in our communities – in our nation and in the world. So how should we pray?

First we **pray according to the word of God**. That is where Daniel began and I believe that is where we should begin. *I, Daniel, perceived in the books.* When Daniel got into the word – his heart got burdened for prayer and fasting. Daniel's prayer started with the word of God and it was saturated with the word – sentence after sentence comes right from the text, and the books of Deuteronomy, Exodus, Psalms and Jeremiah are either alluded to or quoted outright. His prayer overflows with truth because it overflows with the word. Jesus linked prayer with the word when He said in John 15:7: *'If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you'*. In other words, if the word of God is filling your mind, if His word is shaping your thinking – then you will pray the kind of prayers that turn the tide of history and bring His will to pass on earth.

Secondly, we **pray confessing our sin**. Daniel spends a lot of time confessing the sin of his people: *I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep His commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from Your commandments and rules. We have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.* Daniel 9:4-6 This is simply to speak the truth about our condition – not to soft soap the issue. It means agreeing with God about our wickedness, rebellion and treachery and disobedience. It means owning the shame. It also means recognizing God's righteousness and His mercy and forgiveness. It means that we have a sense of brokenness and remorse and guilt before God – recognizing that our sin has not only offended God but brought reproach on His name and the nations mock Him because of us.

Thirdly we pray remembering the mercy and goodness of God. *And now, O Lord our God, who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and have made a name for Yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly. 16 "O Lord, according to all Your righteous acts, let Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy hill, Daniel 9:15-16a* It reminds and assures us that if God saved a disobedient and rebellious people once at the Red Sea, He can and will do it again. Remembering that the past mercies and goodness of God toward His people will sustain prayers for His people in the present. This is why I love to read historical accounts of the mercy and goodness of God among the nations.

Finally, we pray appealing to God's passion for His own glory. Listen to Daniel: *Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for Your own sake, O Lord, make Your face to shine upon Your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline Your ear and hear. Open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by Your name. For we do not present our pleas before You because of our righteousness, but because of Your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for Your own sake, O my God, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name."* Daniel 9:17-19 God's people have God's name, and their ground of righteousness is not theirs but His. And because God has a passion for His own glory, He will not let His name be reproached and made a byword forever. But He will act, He will move, He will thunder from on high when His people who are called by His name, humble themselves with prayers and fastings to see His kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So to give this message feet, as it were, I would like to invite you to join with me in regular times of prayer and fasting. What I would propose is that for this year, 2014, we would take one day a week – that is 52 days out of 365 to fast and pray for ourselves, for our church, and for our community. And because we regularly meet to pray as a church on Tuesday nights, I would invite you all to take Tuesday as a fast day, and mingle it with prayer. And if your schedule won't allow you to join in corporate prayer on Tuesdays, you would take your lunch hour to fast and pray for His kingdom to come, His will to be done in us, in this church and in this community. Or perhaps you are joining the prayer team on Sunday mornings and you would like to take Sunday for a day of prayer and fasting. That works too. The point is not which day, but to take a day and fast and pray. Who knows what God might do through a church fully devoted to fasting and praying for His kingdom to come and His will to be done, for His glory to cover the earth?

This was the essence of Jesus' prayer in John 17, on the night He shared the Passover meal, the first Lord's supper, with His disciples. And as we remember Jesus in this celebration of His sacrifice for our sin and His triumph over all the forces of darkness and death and the devil, let us join our prayers with His for the triumph of this gospel of grace in our lives and in the world.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Grant us to humble ourselves and pray, to seek Your face and turn from our sinful ways. We have sinned against You, O Lord. We have disobeyed Your clear commands, We have not loved You with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Open Your eyes and see our desperate situation, our coldness of heart and apathy toward prayer and the things of God and forgive us. To You O Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness. O God, incline Your ear and hear. Pour out on Your people the spirit of prayer and supplication for Your Name's sake and Your glory. Ignite a burning passion for Your kingdom to come and Your will to be done. For we do not present our pleas before You because of our righteousness, but because of Your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for Your own sake, O my God, because of Your glory and Your people who are called by Your name, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.*