

## BREAKING BARRIERS TO INTIMACY WITH GOD:

### Overcoming Dryness

#### A Study of Matthew 6:16-18

Characteristic of Completeness: Prayer

Big Idea: Fasting can reflect or renew our hunger for God in pivotal times.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 4:1-2; 9:14-17; Luke 2:36-38; 18:11-12;

Acts 9:8-9; 13:1-3; 14:23

Introduction:

1. Sometimes my relationship with God can seem parched and dry. Sometimes I'm thirsty to be close to God, but the thirst seems hard to quench. I drill down for some direction, some guidance, some cue, some evidence of God's presence and leading, but I come up dry.

How can we overcome such dryness? Today, I want to talk about fasting as a way to overcome dryness, particularly at pivotal times in our lives. Fasting is what I'm going to talk about this morning.

2. I suspect that there's a lot of confusion about fasting among Christians today.
  - a. Perhaps some of you have scarcely given fasting a second thought. That's too bad because fasting is biblical, it's certainly something to consider, and you may be missing out on a good thing.
  - b. Perhaps others of you have embraced fasting and made it a part of your life. But, perhaps you need to think through fasting more carefully to make sure you're not fasting for the wrong reasons.
  - c. This morning, I want to try to answer one rather simple question: If you really want to connect with God, what part should fasting play? If you really want to pursue God, how should you handle fasting? What's the relationship between fasting and connecting with God?
3. Our text for this morning is ► Matthew 6:16-18. Let me read it one time through, then we'll go back and study our way through it. Jesus ► says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ► 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

4. The very first word in our text, ► “moreover” is an attempt to translate an original Greek term (*otan de*) that signals a transition from one subject to another, but to a related one (Mitchell, “The Practice of Fasting in the New Testament,” *Bib Sac*, Oct. 1990, p. 458). Having given instruction on prayer, Jesus now turns to fasting. Inasmuch as prayer and fasting are interrelated, the general topic is unchanged. And so, our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week is Prayer.

- I. The phrase, ► “when you fast” raises some important questions. First of all, ► what does it mean to fast?

One author provides a pretty good definition. He ► says, “Fasting is the deliberate abstinence from some form of physical gratification, for a period of time, in order to achieve a greater spiritual goal (Evans, *Tony Evans Speaks Out On Fasting*, 7).”

Most often we think of fasting as saying, “no” to our appetite for ► food. That’s the way it is used most often in the Bible. But, in principle, fasting can include saying, “no” to any number of natural appetites like watching ► television, or surfing ► the internet, or even ► sexual intimacy with one’s spouse (1 Corinthians 7:5). Indeed, even solitude can be a kind of fasting from ► social interaction.

- II. Well, ► when are we supposed to fast? Under what circumstances? When do we know that it’s time to fast?

- A. Jesus doesn’t say when. He merely assumes that the followers who were listening would be fasting at some point in the future. He doesn’t command it; He merely anticipates it, perhaps because his listeners were predominantly Jews who would have been in the habit of fasting anyway.
- B. In fact, nowhere in the entire New Testament is the believer commanded to fast. We are repeatedly commanded to pray, but we are never commanded to fast.
- C. Moreover, fasting is discussed very little in the New Testament. Fasting is mentioned on five different occasions in the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is mentioned three different times in the book of Acts. Then fasting is never mentioned again. Not by Paul. Not by Peter. Not by John. Not by James.<sup>1</sup>
- D. And, we’re left with no clear New Testament directives for when to fast, how often to fast, or how long to fast.
- E. Nevertheless, we can gain some insight into when fasting was practiced by some believers in the New Testament so that we might follow their example, in the absence of clear directives. Based on these examples, which we’ll cover one by one, I want you to

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, the term for fasting is used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 2 Corinthians 11:27, but in both verses it’s used in a nonreligious sense to mean going hungry (Mitchell, 466). Moreover, the word as it appears in the NKJV of Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29, Acts 10:30, and 1 Corinthians 7:5 is a textual variant, not in the earliest manuscripts.

see that proper fasting appears to be an expression to God of a deep, desperate longing to connect with Him for His purposes, particularly during difficult or pivotal times. You may recall from our previous studies of the Lord's Prayer leading up to our text today that God's purposes include honoring His name, building His kingdom, and doing His will. So, in answer to the question, "When should the believer fast?", the answer appears to be, ► "Whenever you want to express to God your longing to connect with Him for His purposes, particularly during difficult or pivotal times." I'll keep this answer on the screen for a while.

I've chose these words carefully to reflect a number of things I want to show you. Fasting is ► voluntary; it's not commanded. Fasting is ► Godward; it's directed to God, not people. Fasting is ► relational; it seeks a relational connection with God. Fasting is ► purposeful; it pursues God's honor, God's kingdom, and God's will. And, fasting is ► circumstantial; it seems to be prompted by pressing circumstances.

Let's briefly consider every example in the New Testament.

1. The ► first mention of fasting comes in Luke 2 in describing a woman named Anna, who had been longing for the arrival of the promised Messiah. Beginning in ► Verse 36, Luke records the time when the baby Jesus was first presented in the temple. Anna was there.

<sup>NKJ</sup> Luke 2:36 Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ► 37 and this woman *was* a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day. ► 38 And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

We are given no indication that Anna's fasting was required. It seems to be a voluntary, spontaneous act based on a longing to see the Messiah come to build His kingdom. And, she's not fasting for her own selfish agenda, but to see God's agenda unfold. And, the times were difficult. It had been hundreds of years since the Messiah was promised and He had not yet come; nothing seemed to be happening. So, Anna fasted.

2. ► Jesus also fasted when He was led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Matthew ► 4:1-2 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.

I think it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus fasted as an expression of His longing to connect with the Father in order to honor His name, to build His kingdom, and to do His will in the face of the impending temptation from Satan. He wanted to connect with the Father so He could pass the test He was about to face.

It is interesting that fasting in the life of Jesus does not appear to be an automatic or mandatory expression of longing for connection with the Father. For example, just before Christ's gut-wrenching spiritual struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, He did not fast, He feasted with His followers. So, it appears that longing for connection makes fasting appropriate, but not mandatory.

3. ► On yet another occasion, Jesus was questioned about fasting. The questioning is recorded in Matthew 9:14-17.

(a) The passage ► begins by saying,

<sup>NJ</sup> Matthew 9:14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Apparently, the disciples of Jesus did not fast. And, this would have raised eyebrows in the Jewish community.

You see, Christ's initial followers were Jews. Since the time of Moses, Jews were required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29; 23:29) as part of the Mosaic Law. That is the only regular fast commanded in the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the regular fast on the Day of Atonement, the Old Testament also speaks well of other ad hoc fasting days in which the entire nation of Israel humbled themselves before God (e.g. 1 Samuel 7:5-6; Jeremiah 14:12).

On top of that, the Jews added their own custom of fasting twice a week on Thursdays and Mondays, because according to tradition, Moses went up on Mount Sinai on a Thursday and came down on a

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<sup>2</sup> It was so well known that it was used as a marker of time. For example, during one of Paul's journeys, it is said in Acts 27:9, "... sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over ..." "The Fast" refers to the Day of Atonement which occurs around the end of September. Sailing got rough after September.

Monday (Mitchell, 458). This twice-a-week fasting became a source of spiritual pride, particularly among Pharisees.<sup>3</sup>

So, it is in this historical context that Jesus is being asked why His disciples aren't fasting. I imagine that the tone of the question was accusatory.

- (b) Jesus' response begins in ► Matthew 9:15:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 9:15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" . . .

In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and Israel is often described metaphorically as a marriage, with God as the bridegroom (Mitchell, 461). So, Jesus is casting Himself as the bridegroom. And, He's saying that there is no need for His followers to fast or mourn as long as He's with them. This seems to confirm our understanding of fasting. Why try to express to God your deep, desperate longing for connection with Him, when you are currently enjoying that connection? Why tell Jesus how much you miss Him while He's with you? It doesn't make sense.

- (c) Jesus goes ► on to say,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 9:15 . . . But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Jesus is predicting His departure to be with His Father after His death and resurrection. After that, He says His followers will fast. He doesn't mandate it; He simply says it's going to happen. It will be appropriate when He's gone.

- (d) Then Jesus ► goes on to say something that is very important. It's something that is rarely linked with fasting, but there is no break in thought. Jesus says in effect, "My followers will fast one day, but not the way you're doing it." You see, Jesus is still talking about fasting when He says in Matthew ► 9:16-17:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 9:16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment,

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus describes the self-righteous prayer of a Pharisee in Luke 18:11-12. He says, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'"

and the tear is made worse. ► 17 Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. ► But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Jesus is talking about the ► incompatibility of the old way of fasting with the new way of fasting that will be ushered in when He departs. Why the incompatibility? What’s fundamentally different about the new fasting of today, as opposed to the old fasting of traditional Judaism? At least two things.

- (1) First, ► the Mosaic Law in the Old Testament would be superseded by Christ, such that we are no longer bound by it as believers today. That’s why we no longer sacrifice animals. And it also means that we are no longer bound by the only command in the Bible to fast regularly on the Day of Atonement.
- (2) Second, I think Jesus is talking about the incompatibility blending rigid, ► religious legalism with His new, fresh teaching. For many Jews like the Pharisees, fasting had become a kind of religious performance. It was a heartless, perfunctory duty. It was an exercise in self-righteousness.

This kind of fasting is not what Jesus has in mind for His followers today. Jesus ► brings a new day—a new day in which fasting is not a religious duty; it’s a relational privilege. Fasting is not forced; it’s allowed. Fasting is not based on the Law; it’s based on the longing of our hearts.

4. ► The Apostle Paul also seems to have fasted. Immediately after Paul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Acts ► 9:8-9 says,

<sup>NJ</sup> Acts 9:8 Then Saul [That was Paul’s other name, Saul] arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought *him* into Damascus. ► 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

It seems that after Paul’s conversion, he fasted. Again, we have no evidence that it was commanded. Rather, it is reasonable to surmise that, in the wake of his whole life being turned upside down by his encounter with the Lord, Paul longed to connect with God, to discover God’s will for his life. Paul desperately needed an answer to the question, “Now what?” Fasting was an expression of his longing.

5. ► Fasting is also associated with the commissioning of the first Christian missionaries, Barnabas and Saul. It's recorded in Acts ► 13:1-3:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Acts 13:1 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: ► Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ► 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ► 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent *them* away.

We're not told explicitly why they fasted. But, I think it's reasonable to think that they faced a common question: Where do we go from here as a church? What do we do now? In wrestling with the question, they longed to connect with God, to make sure to honor His name, to know how to build His kingdom, to discover and do His will. Fasting was an expression of this.

6. ► And finally, fasting is mentioned in association with the selection of elders in the early churches. Acts ► 14:23 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Acts 14:23 So when they [Paul and Barnabas, the missionaries] had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Once again, we are left to speculate about the motivation for fasting. But, we know that the appointment of elders or leaders in churches is absolutely crucial to the honoring of God's name, the advancement of His kingdom, and the doing of His will. Therefore, I think it is reasonable to conclude that Paul and Barnabas felt a strong desire to connect with God in making such important decisions.

7. ► We've covered every instance of fasting in the New Testament apart from our text. And, we are left not with detailed instructions, but just the ► basic notion that fasting is appropriate whenever you want to express to God your longing to connect with Him for His purposes, particularly during difficult or pivotal times.

III. Nevertheless, our text does provide a few more ► guidelines for fasting. It tells us a little more about how to fast.

- A. For example, ► Matthew 6:16 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites . . .

1. Who are the hypocrites? It appears that Jesus has in mind some religious people in His day known as the scribes and Pharisees. The nearest reference to a group of people in our text comes in Matthew 5:20 where Jesus refers specifically to these scribes and Pharisees. And, we know from other Scriptures (e.g. Matthew 23:13-15) that Jesus considers them to be hypocrites.
2. What is the nature of their hypocrisy?
  - a. The word, “hypocrite” was and is used to describe people who pretend to be something they are not. They are counterfeits; they portray something on the outside that is inconsistent with what is on the inside.
  - b. The scribes and Pharisees were religious hypocrites. They pretended to be very godly, righteous, devout, and spiritual on the outside. But, their outward pretense was just a masquerade to cover up some very ungodly motives on the inside.
3. How does this hypocrisy play out in their fasting? ► Verse 16 says that they fast,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:16 “. . . with a sad countenance. [and] they disfigure their faces . . .”

This means that while fasting, the hypocrites put on a moeey, sullen, dismal look. To “disfigure their faces” means to alter their appearance. Fasting was often accompanied by putting on sackcloth which was made of rough, black goat’s hair, and covering oneself with ashes, and even tearing one’s clothing (Davies & Allison, *Matthew, ICC*, 618).

4. Why do they do this? ► Verse 16 says they do it . . .

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:16 “. . . that they may appear to men to be fasting.”

Hypocrites fast to show off. They fast to impress people. They fast for the purpose of pretending to be really spiritual. They fast so that people will think they are wonderful.

5. What actually happens when hypocrites fast this way? Jesus says, in ► Verse 16,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:16 “. . . Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.”

The reward of hypocritical fasting is whatever praise might come from people who buy the sanctimonious charade. If you fast to show off, the only reward you might get is from somebody you've duped into thinking you're spiritual.

But, there will be no reward from God. God does not honor hypocritical fasting. It's an insult to Him.

6. Any hypocritical fasting going on in the church today? Yup.
  - a. Some wear their fasting like a badge of honor.
  - b. Some go on a diet to lose weight and call it a fast.
  - c. Some work their fasting into conversations to let you know that they are among the spiritual elite.

B. But, Jesus says we are not to fast like these hypocrites. He then turns to His followers and says in ► Verse 17,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:17 "But you, when you fast . . ."

Here's how you do it.

1. He ► says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:17 ". . . anoint your head and wash your face"

This is not some special religious hygiene ritual. Jesus is simply telling His followers to act normal when they fast. Carry on outwardly as if you're not fasting. Don't look sad or disheveled or unusual in any way to draw attention to your fasting.

2. Why? In ► Verse 18, Jesus says it's . . .

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:18 "so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place* . . ."

You see, fasting is a matter between you and God. You should fast to an audience of One. You should fast to express yourself to God, not to impress other people.

Does this preclude occasional fasting as a group? No. The church leaders at Antioch fasted together. But, their focus was on God, not each other. Remember, fasting is an expression to God of a deep, desperate longing to connect with Him for the purpose of honoring His name, building His

kingdom, and doing His will, particularly during difficult or pivotal times. There's nothing showy about it.

- C. ► We have now covered every New Testament passage that talks about fasting and we're still left with many unanswered questions about how to do it. How frequently? How long? How much? While this may be frustrating for those of us who like to nail down details and procedures, I take it that the unanswered questions about method don't really matter, or that the methods are so varied and personalized that one size does not fit all.

1. If fasting is an expression of our longing to connect, then maybe we simply let the longing determine the method and leave it at that.

This reminds me of the time when I was dating Cathy, my wife-to-be. We began dating right after we both graduated from high school. But, she went to California to go to college while I remained in Arizona. In Cathy's absence, I experienced a deep longing to connect with her. Was I commanded to express my longing? No. But, it certainly happened. How did I express my longing? I didn't have to agonize over it too much. It was very natural for me to let my longing determine the method. Initially, I wrote letters. How often did I write? Frequently enough to express my longing. How lengthy were the letters? Long enough to express my longing. Eventually, I graduated to sending audiotapes. Then lengthy phone calls. Then more and more personal visits. I let the longing to connect determine the method of my expression.

And, there is no basis for comparison with anyone else. It wouldn't be proper for me to compare the number and length of my letters with anyone else to try to determine who has the deeper love.

2. Some of you may be thinking, "What if I have no real longing to connect with God through fasting?"
  - a. For some, the absence of such longing may simply mean that your connection with God is quite satisfying right now. Your regular times of prayer are rich. Your consistent intake of God's Word is fulfilling. If so, don't feel guilty about not feeling compelled to fast right now. It's not commanded. It's not a requirement. It doesn't mean that you love God less than someone else who is fasting.
  - b. On the other hand, whenever we do not have a longing for God, we must ask ourselves an important question: Have I allowed the junk food of this world to curb my appetite for God? Has my pursuit of the physical things of this world dulled my sensitivity to spiritual things? If so, perhaps fasting can be a means of stirring a hunger for God.

You see, there may be two sides to the coin of fasting. One side expresses a longing; the other side rekindles it. Fasting can be a way of setting aside our appetite for the pleasures of this world in order to refresh and renew our appetite for God. These two sides of fasting are including in the ► Big Idea of my sermon: Fasting can reflect or renew our hunger for God in pivotal times. On the one hand, fasting can *reflect* the spiritual hunger we feel. On the other hand, fasting can also *renew* the spiritual hunger that has been dulled.<sup>4</sup> Fasting can reflect or renew our hunger for God in pivotal times.

3. Some of you may be thinking, “Okay. I think I’m drawn to fasting, but I don’t even know where to start or what to do.” Let me make a suggestion.

If you’ve been around here for the past couple of months, you may know that, as a church family, this is a pivotal time. We are seeking God’s will for the future of His church here at Moon Valley. The staff is going to be meeting multiple times this week, and after the Sunday services next weekend, we’re headed for the mountains. We’re going to hole up in a cabin together, and by God’s grace, we’re going to hammer out some plans for a new day at Moon Valley.

This is exactly the kind of pivotal situation for which fasting would be perfectly appropriate. Not mandatory, but appropriate. So I invite you to fast one day this week.

The type of fast is up to you. Maybe you could skip breakfast and lunch on Wednesday. And during the time you would have otherwise eaten, you could pray for Moon Valley. Or maybe you could simply turn off the TV this week and pray instead.

And maybe you could use ► Colossians 1:9-10 as the content of your prayer. It’s what the Apostle Paul prayed for a church and its leaders in the ancient town of Colossae. Here’s a ► personalized version of Colossians 1:9-10 that you could pray:

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<sup>4</sup> A noted pastor and author explains the two sides this way. He says,

*Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God. . . . Half of Christian fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. The other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense. In the first half, [our physical] appetite is lost. In the second half, [our physical] appetite is resisted. In the first, we yield to the higher [spiritual] hunger that is. In the second, we fight for the higher [spiritual] hunger that isn’t. Christian fasting is not only the spontaneous effect of a superior satisfaction in God; it is also a chosen weapon against every force in the world that would take satisfaction away.*

He goes on the say,

*the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable (John Piper, *A Hunger for God*, 14).*

*Lord, I ask that we may be filled with the knowledge of Your will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, especially our leaders; that we all may walk worthy of You, fully pleasing You, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of You.*

Don't worry too much about the exact wording. But maybe you could go on the church website, print the transcript for this sermon, cut out this little example prayer, and put it in a place where you will be reminded. Maybe put it on the bathroom mirror. Or on the dashboard of your car. Or in your wallet. Or on the TV. Or maybe take it to your Life Group. So that you can remember to pray and fast.

It would be exciting and encouraging to know that some of you are praying and fasting with us.

- IV. It would be exciting because Jesus assures us about ► the result of fasting. He says that, if we're fasting for the right reasons, our Father will reward us. In the last part of ► Verse 18, Jesus says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:18 “. . . and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

What does this mean?

- A. It certainly does *not* mean that fasting is a way to get our self-centered desires met. For example, fasting so that God will make you rich would be an attempt to make God a party to your own spiritual adultery. Remember, fasting is directed toward God's purposes, not ours.
- B. I think it does mean, at least in part, that upon Christ's return, believers who have fasted with pure motives will be praised by Him. This is consistent with ► 1 Corinthians 4:5 which says,

<sup>NLT</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:5 . . . When the Lord comes, he will bring our deepest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. And then God will give to everyone whatever praise is due.

That's a powerful reward and motivation for me.

- C. ► I think fasting can also bring rewards in this life, here and now. What rewards?
1. Well, if you long to connect with God, you will be rewarded with the joy of that connection. The primary reward of fasting is not some gift, but God Himself.
  2. And, if you long to connect for the purposes expressed in the Lord's Prayer—honoring God's name, building His kingdom, and doing His will—you will be

rewarded with the privilege of seeing these things happen. Perhaps not in ways that you expect, but perhaps in ways that exceed your expectations.

► Just think. Nearly 2,000 years ago, a handful of leaders from a local church sat down and said, “We long to connect with God so that His purposes might be fulfilled through us. So, let’s pray. Let’s fast.”

And, the Holy Spirit moved them to send two missionaries from their midst. Just two. Barnabas and Paul.

And, God was pleased to reward them. Christianity would rise from obscurity to prominence through the planting of many churches by Paul and Barnabas. Paul would write 13 of 27 New Testament books. And, the course of world history would be changed. And, you are now seated here in this church. All because God was pleased to reward prayer and fasting.

Just think of what God might do to change the world through us as we fast and pray.