

PREPARING for 21 DOP

One of the things we love about New Year's has to do with that first word "NEW". It means we have an opportunity for a new start. A fresh beginning. Old things are behind us and we have an opportunity to do something NEW this year. That is why so many people make NEW year's resolutions - those resolutions are usually tied to the things that we feel DIDN'T GO SO WELL in the previous year. So let me ask you a question, **"What do you want to be NEW in your life this year?"** Pastor Mike Pittman, our founding pastor, coined this phrase and it is one I want all of us to adopt. In fact, rather than being just something we say I hope this becomes something we believe and believe so much that we actually live it out, and here it is - **If you want this year to be your best year, make it your best year spiritually.**

You see I am afraid that we do not understand how important our spiritual foundation is when it comes to life. Far too many people just try to tack on God and spiritual pursuits as if they were **some sort of good luck charm they are hoping will change their fortune for the year ahead or they neglect it altogether as if it isn't important at all.** We need to understand that everything that is good or good for our lives must be tied to a spiritual foundation. And here is why this is important, because if we do not have something motivating us from outside of ourselves we will in the end destroy or work in opposition to the things that are good for us! For example, I can decide that I want to be more healthy and eat better and exercise more in 2024. But if I am not motivated by my love for God and a growing understanding of how my health impacts my ability to carry out the mission Jesus has for me, I am going to usually end up gravitating toward the place that is most comfortable for my flesh. As a result, I may end up quitting one week in because it is too hard, I may end up becoming addicted to working out and obsessed with my health to the neglect of other priorities or I may become impressed with the way I look as a result of my new lifestyle to the point of becoming vain and self-centered. But if I have a spiritual motivation then God can bring a proper balance to my life and not only will what I do benefit me but it will also glorify Him. And I believe this is true of anything we undertake in life.

Everything we do or embark upon in life has a motivation behind it. You are either motivated by your flesh or you are motivated by your love for Jesus! It will either benefit the flesh and in the end harm your life or it will bless your life and also bring glory to God.

My goal today is to give you some inspiration, motivation and preparation to do just that, to allow God to be a motivator of your heart and to bring balance to the things that you set out to accomplish in 2023. That you will in fact **make 2023 your best year because you are going to make 2023 your best year spiritually. (So Let's Pray and ask God to open our hearts to what He wants to do in our lives in 2023 and over the 21 DOP)**

Over the 21 DOP, beginning next Sunday (January 7th through the 27th), we as a church are going to enter into 21 days of prayer and fasting. This is an incredible opportunity for you to allow God to evaluate your heart and to achieve spiritual breakthrough regarding spiritual issues

in your lives that may be hindering you from stepping into what God has for you. Fasting and prayer is one of the most powerful spiritual exercises we can engage in, but due to the need for self denial in this process, unfortunately it isn't a very popular one. What it all boils down to is this, **How desperate are you for a breakthrough in your life spiritually and do you really want 2024 to be your best year ever?** If you are desperate for God and you do want 2024 to be your best year ever, I want to challenge you to join with us over these 21 days and enter into this concentrated time of fasting and prayer. I promise you that it will change your life in a way you never thought possible. You will connect with God in a way like never before and if you are looking for a spiritual breakthrough in your life this will be an exercise that will help you accomplish it. Our goal for today is to give you a plan for how you can position yourself over these 21 days to enable God to prepare you for your best year spiritually. So to prepare us for that, I want to deal with 3 QUESTIONS regarding fasting:

Question #1 - WHAT is fasting and WHY is it so important for our lives spiritually?

Fasting is a spiritual exercise designed to create MARGIN that allows God to move in our lives! Fasting is like a big MARGIN in a Study BIBLE where you have extra room to take notes or jot down insights. Fasting gives God extra margin in our hearts for Him to speak to us or impress certain things on our hearts so that the busyness of life doesn't choke out His voice or His presence.

The word "fast" is derived from a Hebrew word that refers to the practice of self-denial. Most scholars believe that this practice began when God's people would experience a loss of appetite during times associated with great distress. In the Old Testament we see the practice of fasting as a way for God's people to express remorse over their sin. In the New Testament we see the practice continued by the disciples of John the Baptist as well as the Pharisees. The only instruction Jesus gives us about fasting is that our fasting should differ from that of the Pharisees who arrogantly used it as religious posturing to impress people with how spiritual they were and who did not seem to express a true heart of remorse regarding their sin when they would fast. Fasting became a vital part of the New Testament church as we see from Acts 13 and 1 Corinthians 7. In each case it was the practice of self denial where they would purposefully deny themselves normal pleasures so as to create MARGIN in their lives where they could focus more intently in prayer and the worship of God. Those pleasures that were denied included food, drink, and in some cases even sex. It would become a way of posturing oneself spiritually so as to seek God's face more intently without any distractions and to express a sense of desperation for God. We have many examples throughout the Bible where God's people would engage in a time of fasting and prayer for spiritual breakthrough. In fact, we could really categorize all of them into one of nine different PURPOSES where we may want to enter into a time of fasting and prayer. Each of these PURPOSES are situations where we recognize that we cannot solve or overcome these problems without God's help and so we intently focus on Him in a concentrated time of fasting and prayer. As we go through each of these I would like for you to write these down as a reminder of the 9 different types of fasts you could practice

over our 21 DOP. **Please note the PURPOSE for the fast has more to do with the breakthrough you are desiring more than it does the thing you are fasting from.**

- 1) **The Disciple's Fast** where the purpose is to pray for the freeing of ourselves or of others from an addiction to sin that is so strong that it requires a time of concentrated fasting and prayer. (Matt. 17:21 - The story of the demon possessed boy that the disciples could not cast out and where Jesus told them that "this kind does not go out except by fasting and prayer.")
- 2) **The Ezra Fast** where the purpose is to lift a heavy burden or to solve an ongoing problem that has been hard to address or solve. (Ezra 8:23 - Ezra looked to the Lord for protection and for His help in dealing with the enemies that were threatening them while they were trying to rebuild Jerusalem)
- 3) **The Samuel Fast** where the purpose is to pray for freedom from physical or spiritual oppression. (1 Sam. 7:6 - Samuel prayed for Israel to be delivered from the sin that had allowed the Ark of The Covenant to be captured by their enemies)
- 4) **The Elijah Fast** where the purpose is to overcome a mental or emotional issue that is controlling our lives. (1 Kings 19:4-8 - Elijah overwhelmed with depression while fleeing Queen Jezebel who wanted him dead)
- 5) **The Widow's Fast** where the purpose is to go without so we can share with others who have need. (1 Kings 17:16 - where the widow took what little she had and provided for Elijah and God through Elijah provided for the widow)
- 6) **The Apostle Paul Fast** where the purpose is to receive clear insight and perspective regarding an important decision. (Acts 9:9 - Where God appeared to Saul and he was converted to Paul and the direction of his life changed forever)
- 7) **The Daniel Fast** where the purpose is for health or healing and to demonstrate faith in God (Daniel 1:8 - Where Daniel did not eat of the King's delicacies to show his trust in God for his strength and health)
- 8) **The John The Baptist Fast** where the purpose is to become more righteous and set apart to God so as to have a greater impact on others lives. (Luke 1:15 - Where John avoided wine or strong drink to be more set apart to God and His mission of preparing the way for Jesus)
- 9) **The Esther Fast** where the purpose is to seek protection in a difficult or dangerous situation (Esther 4:16-5:2 - Where others had fasted for Esther so that she would plead for her people before for the King at the risk of her own life)

10) **The Action Fast** where the purpose is to put faith and service into action.

(Isaiah 58 - Where God states that He wants fasts that free people in bondage, feed the hungry, take care of our families, and meet people's needs)

Notice that in each one of these circumstances the people were in a DESPERATE situation that required God's supernatural help. You see, some of us don't see the need to fast because we are not desperate for God's help. Either we don't see the desperate need for HIS help meaning we are comfortable where we are or we are looking to other places for our help and we don't see our need for God. Fasting (where we willingly and purposefully deny ourselves fleshly comforts) is only possible if we are desperate for a breakthrough - whether it be emotional, spiritual, a tough decision, a dangerous situation, a greater desire to be used by God or a physical healing. The question is, "**Are you desperate for God?**" If you are, the seriousness of your desperation should cause you to be more hungry for God than you are for the creature comforts of your normal life. Fasting is an opportunity to loudly proclaim to God, "I NEED YOU more than anything else!" Are you that desperate? Is your situation, whatever it is, something that you know you need God's help with for a breakthrough and you are declaring that boldly before God by purposefully denying yourself so that you can pursue Him in prayer? That is what fasting is and that is why it is important as a discipline for our life! It is an act of worship that shows God we are serious about our need for His help.

Question #2 - How do we keep the practice of fasting from becoming a vain religious exercise?

Just like with any spiritual discipline if we are not careful we can turn it into a vain religious activity where we just go through the motions and where our religious activity really has no spiritual value for our lives. This is where our religious practice does not match with how we actually live our life on the daily. (Warning: this is a real temptation for those of us who participate in this every year!!) This can be true of our church attendance and service, our Bible reading and even our prayer life. There are countless examples throughout God's word where God rebukes his people for the vanity surrounding their religious posturing that bears no real spiritual fruit in their lives.

Isaiah 29:13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught."

Matthew 15:3, 8-9 (NIV) **3** Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? **8** "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. **9** They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

In both cases the people who are supposed to be engaged in worship are rebuked because they had allowed religious traditions to become more important than God's word and as a result

their religious activity had no bearing on their lives or their hearts. And the same can also happen when we fast if we do not fast with a proper heart motive,

Isaiah 58:1 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. **2** For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. **3** ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ The people are complaining that God has not heard them and given them a breakthrough even though they have fasted and prayed. Their prayers are going unanswered and their problem still remains. God instructs Isaiah to tell them why. The reason, they are rebellious and are continuing in their sin. Religious activity that does not convict us of sin and leads us to repentance and a change in our behavior is simply meaningless. It has no real power and God is not impressed with our religious activity. Instead of a change of heart and behavior, notice what they were doing! “**Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. 4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.** God says their fasting has done nothing to change their attitudes! They still do as they please, they still exploit people for personal gain, they still quarrel and fight among themselves. You see, if we don’t, we end up right back where we started before we asked Him for help! We don’t want to admit it but most of the time our current distress is the result of our own sinful heart. When we fail to see this we use religious exercises as a good luck charm hoping to impress God and gain His favor so that He will change our current situation. If we want to keep our fasting from becoming a vain religious activity we have to start with a broken heart that is broken over our sin! **5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?** Physical postures (bowing their head without bowing their heart) (lying in sackcloth and ashes without actually mourning) are religious activities steeped in a tradition that can be performed physically without actually engaging the heart. This kind of religious exercise does not impress God. Anyone can do that! Anyone can go through the motions and pretend. But if we don’t experience a change of heart leading to a change of behavior God is not going to change our situation? **6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?** Sometimes the answer to our situation depends on us doing the thing that God told us to do in the first place. A simple correction of our own behavior motivated by a love for Him and His word. To do it with a sincere heart as unto the Lord so that He can bless through us and we can be a conduit of His love. Notice what will happen if we do! **8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.** “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and

malicious talk, **10** and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. **11** The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. **12** Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

The key to keeping your fast from becoming a vain religious exercise is to approach it with a broken heart that is willing to allow God to show you what needs to change in your life first before you focus on what it is you need breakthrough in. In the first week of our fast we will spend time asking God to examine our heart. The real question we need to ask is this, **Is the message of my life CLEAR? Does my religious practice match with how I am living and paint a CLEAR picture of God or is it CONFUSING by sending mixed messages.** Then and only then do we position ourselves for God to move on our behalf!

Question #3 - How can I engage in fasting and prayer for 21 days?

Take the 9 Purposes for Fasting that were mentioned at the beginning of this message (and if you didn't get them all we will list them again online this week or you can go back to the beginning and re-watch so you can get them down). Take the next 7 days leading up to our 21 DOP and I want you to IDENTIFY your GOAL for this year's fast. As you think about your GOAL you need to consider 5 important aspects to your fast.

- 1) **Identify what you want to see breakthroughs in:** (Select a purpose for your fast. You may even have multiple purposes)
 - **The Disciple's Fast** praying for the freedom from and addicting sin
 - **The Ezra Fast** praying for the lifting of a heavy burden or to solve an ongoing problem
 - **The Samuel Fast** praying for freedom from physical or spiritual oppression.
 - **The Elijah Fast** praying to overcome a mental or emotional issue that is controlling our lives.
 - **The Widow's Fast** praying for those who do not have what they need and for God to supply
 - **The Apostle Paul Fast** praying for clear insight and perspective regarding an important decision.
 - **The Daniel Fast** praying for health or healing

- **The John The Baptist Fast** praying to be more set apart for greater impact
- **The Esther Fast** praying for protection in a difficult or dangerous situation

2) **Identify what you will deny yourself** (make it sting your flesh and stretch you to really have to depend on God) Everyone can participate even if you don't fast from food or are limited health wise regarding food. Select something that you will give up for the entire 21 days.

(Example)

- Full Fast (1 day, 3 days, 7 days)
- Daniel Diet Fast (Search Online what is acceptable what is not)
- Liquid Fast
- Social Media/video games/TV & Netflix (whatever competes for mind and time space that you enjoy)

3) **Identify what you will replace it with that will edify you spiritually.**

- Devotion Material (Bible App devotions) (We are providing a free prayer booklet next Sunday to help lead you through the fast)
- Select a Book to read that will edify you spiritually, select a spiritual movie or movies (i.e. The Chosen TV series), (**Call attention to Right NOW media - Text 49775 you will receive a link**) make it something that doesn't just entertain you but edifies and challenges you spiritually.
- More Time Set aside for prayer through the day (have a prayer plan where you focus on certain things so that it doesn't get redundant and include worship music)
- Attend the weekly PRAYER gathering at each location that will take place on THURSDAY evenings
- Plan to be with us each Sunday in January for our Prayer Series as we teach on PRAYER

4) **Identify someone to hold you accountable to your commitment and who will pray for you during this time.**

5) **Commit to the full 21 days.**

- Use this week leading up to next Sunday (January 7th) to prayerfully consider your plan.
- Even when you break full food fasts continue the fast in SOME way (give an example)

3 full day fast with water only

4 full days liquids (smoothies, juices)

14 days of Daniel

Combine along with an entertainment fast for the full 21 days as well

The beautiful thing about setting a GOAL is that you can **CELEBRATE** what you achieve. Even if you don't meet your goal, any progress you make in this fasting process is a win especially if you approach it with the right heart.

Finally, as you fast I want you to do so privately and without a lot of fan fare. Fasting should never be used as something to impress people with how spiritual you are. The only person that really needs to know about your fast is your accountability partner. Here is what Jesus says about fasting:

Matthew 6:16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

If you want this year to be your best year, make it your best year spiritually.

(Make end of message a time for concentrated prayer and commitment for 21 days)

Worship Team Comes Back Up