

Greetings, Loved Ones!

I hope you've all enjoyed part one of our article, "Hungry for God". It's time for part two in the three part series. Author of the series, Dr. David Feddes, has entitled part two "Hungry for Mercy".

If you missed part one, you can get it in our "past articles" section. The same will be the case for part two, when we post part three.

Here's part two in our Hungry for God series.

Pastor

HUNGRY FOR MERCY

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, and with fasting and weeping and mourning." Joel 2:12

Do you know what it's like to be so troubled that you lose your appetite? A loved one dies, and you're so devastated that you can't eat much or sleep well. Your marriage collapses, and food loses its taste for you. You lose your job or business, and you're too upset to follow your regular pattern of meals. Food is part of a normal routine, but in times of crisis, the normal routine collapses and food doesn't seem to matter much.

Many of us have lost interest in food for a while when something went wrong, but have you ever stopped eating because you yourself were terribly wrong?

Have you ever felt so sick about what you've done, so ashamed of your wrongdoing, so fearful of the consequences, that you didn't feel like eating?

Have you been so eager for forgiveness, so desperate for God to give you a fresh start, so hungry for mercy, that you lost your hunger for food? Have you

every stopped in your tracks, halted business as usual, and even skipped mealtimes in order to seek mercy? Fasting is a way of acknowledging that sin is serious and that we yearn for God's mercy more than we want our next meal.

Fasting is a way of saying that in order to survive, we need God's forgiving and transforming grace more than we need food.

God saves us from sin by means of repentance and faith in Jesus. Repentance is

more than feeling bad or saying, "I'm sorry." Repentance is more than a thought in the mind or an emotion in the heart. Repentance is hating sin with an almost physical loathing, and repentance is turning away from sin in order to find satisfaction in God. Fasting expresses and strengthens this loathing for sin and this longing for new life. There are other occasions and purposes for fasting that we'll talk about on other programs, but today's program is about fasting to show repentance and seek mercy.

The Bible tells of individuals and religious communities and entire nations who interrupted business as usual and abstained from food when they realized how much they had offended God and provoked his judgment. They were so hungry for mercy that their hunger for food didn't seem to matter. They fasted as a physical expression of their spiritual anguish and longing. Fasting helped them on their path to new life, and fasting can help us on the path to new life.

Turning Point

Saul of Tarsus was a proud Pharisee. He hated Christians and hunted them down in order to kill or imprison them. But then Jesus appeared to Saul in a blinding light and stopped him in his tracks. In the light of Christ, Saul saw Jesus' glory and saw his own evil. In fact, that's all Saul could see for a while.

“For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything” (Acts 9:9).

That was the turning point in Saul’s life.

During those three days when Saul’s eyes saw nothing and his mouth ate nothing, his heart was hungry for mercy. His guilt and evil hit him with full force. He was eager to leave his old ways and start fresh. Instead of eating, he prayed. After three days of this, the Lord restored Saul’s vision and revived his spirit. Saul became the apostle Paul and preached the gospel to many nations. The story of Paul’s encounter with Christ is often told to show that a personal encounter with Christ leads to repentance and new life. However, we often ignore Paul’s three-day fast. We ignore the biblical connection between fasting and repentance. Was Paul’s fasting was just a minor detail about his conversion? No, repentance and fasting go together. What God has joined together, let us not separate. Paul fasted at the turning point of his life, and fasting can be part of the turning point for you. If you hunger for God’s mercy, then fast and pray as Paul did.

The Bible speaks of a day of reckoning, the day of the Lord, when we must face God in all his power and purity. When God confronts us, who is sinless and holy enough to deserve his approval? None of us. Who is strong enough to resist his power? Nobody. If God comes and we have not yet repented or found forgiveness, we are doomed. What hope is there for us? The prophet Joel writes,

The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, and with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart... Return to the

Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows?

He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing (Joel 2:11-14).

God's judgment is terrible but his mercy is great. If we go through life ignoring the coming judgment, the Lord will not spare us. We will be punished forever in the fire of hell. But if God's warnings shake us up, stop us in our tracks, and turn us around, we may taste his mercy and love.

No matter how bad you've been, no matter how far you've gone down the path to hell, it's not too late for you. "Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, and with fasting and weeping and mourning." To all who repent and turn to God with fasting and faith in the Savior, God promises in the book of Joel, "I will pour out my Spirit... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:28,32). Believe God's warning, and accept his promise. Admit your sinfulness. Set your heart on his promise of salvation through Jesus and new life through his Holy Spirit. Return to him with fasting. No more business as usual. Stop eating for a while. It may be for 24 hours, it may be for a few days, but stop eating, and start hungering for mercy. The Lord who saved Paul by his amazing grace can save you too. As Paul wrote after Jesus saved him, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:16).

Amazing Grace

The Bible book of Jonah tells an amazing story of fasting followed by mercy. Nineveh was the strongest city in the world, but its evil stank to high heaven. The city was headed toward a day of judgment. Nineveh was the capital city of

the Assyrian Empire. Nineveh was full of idol worship and witchcraft. It was perverted and immoral. The people of Nineveh were harsh and violent toward each other, and they were cruel to other nations. The empire headed by Nineveh invaded and plundered, tortured and burned, massacred or enslaved entire cities and nations. Nineveh was so aggressive and violent that it was called “the city of blood” (see Nahum 3:1-4). God decided not to put up with Nineveh’s evil any longer. He sent the prophet Jonah to Nineveh, and Jonah preached a message of doom.

He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything. Do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.

When God saw what they did and how they had turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (Jonah 3:4-10).

The important thing the Ninevites did was to repent. Abstaining from food and

abstaining from fine clothing were less important than really being sorry and seeking to change. But body and soul are not separate. Their fasting was the bodily expression of their spiritual change of heart. A grieving spirit does not party hearty. Repentance and fasting go together. The people of Nineveh repented and fasted, and God forgave them.

How badly do you need forgiveness? How much do you want it? How desperate are you for God to have compassion on you? Are you really hungry for mercy? Don't just talk about it. Prove it. Don't be distracted by parties or even by regular mealtimes. Commit yourself to a time of fasting to express your sorrow for sin and your longing for God's mercy, forgiveness, and new life. As you do this, trust the Lord and pray in faith, "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Fasting After Conversion

Fasting to seek forgiveness and renewal is valuable if you are coming to know Christ for the very first time, and even after you have put your faith in Jesus, there may still be times when you fast to repent of sin and seek mercy. Fasting is valuable not just at the time of conversion but also after.

God commanded the Israelites of the Old Testament to set one day each year as a Day of Atonement (yom kippur in Hebrew). The priests would offer sacrifices for the sins of the people, pointing forward to the final sacrifice of Jesus to remove sin. On this annual Day of Atonement, God commanded, "You must deny yourselves" (Leviticus 16:29,31; 23:27,29; 29:7). Some form of fasting or self-denial was a vital part of seeking atonement for sin and restoring a relationship with God.

With the coming of Jesus and the New Covenant, animal sacrifices are no longer needed, and a set day every year to fast and seek God's mercy is no longer required. But the principle remains, and from time to time it's healthy to fast and seek God's mercy with special intensity, especially on occasions when the guilt of a particular sin weighs you down.

Maybe you're thinking, "I'm not going to beg for mercy or go without food.

It's uncomfortable to go without food, and it's degrading to say I'm a guilty sinner. I'm basically a good person, and I'm not going to let anybody make me feel bad." But beware of thinking you're okay the way you are and never need to humble yourself before God. The Bible says that if we say we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and make God out to be a liar (1 John

1:8,10). We'll never be right with God as long as we do that.

But if we come to the Lord humbly and hungrily, he will welcome us in love and make us fit for fellowship with him. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:5).

So whether you're coming to Christ for the first time and need a lifetime of sins taken away, or whether you're a long-time follower of Jesus who still needs forgiveness and cleansing on a regular basis, God's mercy is there for the asking. Fasting is a way to ask with special intensity.

Seeking Mercy For Others

Sometimes the hunger for mercy involves not just oneself as an individual but an entire group of people. If you're part of a local congregation that was once strong in faith and holiness but now families are falling apart, lust and greed

and quarrels and false teaching are piling up, your congregation may be tasting God's judgment. Perhaps your whole congregation ought to set a time for fasting and prayer. Perhaps the leaders can call for a special time of fasting by all in the church.

But even if the leaders don't see any need for this, even if the congregation as a whole is still groggy with the sleep of sin, you yourself can still fast and plead with God to forgive those sins and bring the congregation back to him. When a congregation or a denomination needs revival and transformation, it might not start with everybody seeing the light at once. It might start with just one person or a handful of people who see the sin for what it is and long for God's truth and love to shine brightly again. If you truly love your church, then go to God with fasting and prayer. Ask him to have mercy and turn things around.

Some church people, alarmed at bad developments in their church or society, have become activists and lobbyists. They start new groups and publications to fight ungodly trends, and they try to mobilize the votes to gain political strength for the cause of right. Sometimes this kind of activism is right and is even our duty, but it's not enough. Lobbying other people is not as important as lobbying God. Putting forth our own efforts to make a difference is not as powerful as calling on God. If a society or church has come under God's judgment, all our activities will count for little if those activities do not include fasting and prayer for God to withdraw his judgment and pour out mercy and transformation.

Sometimes we must seek God's mercy not just for ourselves as individuals but for the large people of which we're part. In the time of Moses, the Israelite

people sinned against God by making a golden calf to worship. God told Moses that he was angry enough to destroy them all. What did Moses do in response to God's anger? As Moses later told the people, "I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the LORD's sight and so provoking him to anger. I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the LORD listened to me" (Deuteronomy 9:18-19). Now, this forty-day fast was a supernatural fast in which God miraculously kept Moses alive without food and water, and none of us should go completely without food and drink for such a long time. But the principle remains that at a time of terrible sin and desperate need for mercy, fasting accompanies prayers for pardon, and one person's intercession can make a difference for many.

A nation and civilization that persistently offends God will feel the heavy hand of judgment. Relationships will fall apart. Wealth will become uncertain or decay. Diseases will spread. Wars and acts of terror will increase. Children will be aborted or neglected. Depression and despair will become more common. If that society pretends this is all normal and plunges ahead with business as usual, the misery will only grow worse, or God may send a calamity so terrible that this nation and its people vanish from the earth.

This program is heard in many nations. I urge each of you listening to me, whatever nation you're in, to think about your particular country. Are its people faithful to God for the most part, and is there evidence of God's favor? Or do you see signs of judgment and the shadow of death looming? If you love

your country and love the Lord Jesus, do you ever fast and pray for God to have mercy on your nation? Do you ever hunger and plead for God to transform society before it's too late?

Nations aren't the only ones in danger of judgment. Many churches are provoking God and getting close to the point of no return. Congregations and entire denominations are losing the truth on which they were founded, or are losing the joyous love for the Lord which once burned brightly, or are sliding into sins and approving things that God abhors, or are drowsy deadbeats who have lost the energy and life that they once had through the Holy Spirit, or are lukewarm and complacent. In the book of Revelation, Jesus speaks of these problems in various churches, and he doesn't just express mild disapproval. Jesus warns of judgment on churches that don't change. Jesus says such things as, "If you do not repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:5). "Repent... or I will soon come to you and fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (2:16). "If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief" (3:3). "I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (3:16).

What does Jesus see in your congregation or denomination? Is it aflame with love for God, or has the love dwindled? Is it faithful to biblical truth, or do its doctrines shift with the wind? Are the families solid and the people holy, or have individuals become corrupt and families fallen into ruin? Is it alive and growing in grace, or have the people become mostly deadbeats and lukewarm? I'm not asking you to pass judgment or to be holier than thou. Just be honest. Is your church what God wants it to be, or are you in danger of having Jesus spit you out of his mouth? If your church is truly flourishing, thank God and pray

that his blessing may continue and increase. But if you must honestly say your church is in trouble, don't just complain or go on the attack against those whom you think are ruining it. Get on your knees, and give up some meals. Go to God in fasting and prayer—hungry for his mercy on your church.

Daniel's Approach

If you want a pattern of prayer for a church or a nation that is tasting God's judgment, listen to a prayer the Bible records in Daniel chapter 9. Daniel was a man of God who was both a prophet and a political leader. His people had already fallen under God's judgment and were in exile, but Daniel discovered in the Scriptures that God had spoken of mercy and of bringing his people back.

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed:

“O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets...

“Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame... because we have sinned against you. The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; we have not obeyed the Lord our God...

Therefore the curses... have been poured out on us, because we have

sinned against you. You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster... yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth...

We have sinned, we have done wrong. O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath...

Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.

(Daniel 9:3-19)

Daniel was brokenhearted over his people's sin and the disasters that had come upon them, yet he put his hope in God's mercy. When Daniel spoke of the people's sins, he didn't claim to be perfect but included himself among the sinners who provoked God. Daniel didn't use fasting and prayer as a way of twisting God's arm but of coming to a God whose arms were already open to welcome people back, whose hand was already open to bless, and who had already spoken promises of salvation.

Fasting and prayers of repentance are the way faith takes hold of what God has already made available in Jesus Christ. Fasting is not a way to punish ourselves and atone for what we've done by making ourselves miserable. The blood of Jesus is the full payment for sin. Fasting is only an expression of sorrow for sin and hunger for God, not a method of self-inflicted punishment.

Various religions promote fasting, but only fasting based on faith in Jesus can connect with God's mercy. The power to obtain forgiveness is not in fasting; the power is in the blood of Jesus, poured out on the cross to purchase salvation for his people. Fasting does not produce the new life of holiness and love; only God's Holy Spirit can do this. Fasting does not revive a church or renew a nation; only the hand of God can do this. What then is the value of fasting? Fasting and prayers of repentance are the God-appointed way for sinners to admit our own failure and to seek what only Christ can give us. So trust and obey God when he says, "Return to me with all your heart, and with fasting and weeping and mourning... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:12,32).