

**Evening Devotion: to read after dinner on Thursday as you start your fast
*Read Matthew 3:13-4:2***

In Matthew 3, Jesus has experienced a powerful moment during his baptism. A moment when the veil between heaven and earth was pulled back. A moment when the Holy Spirit takes physical form. A moment when the Father speaks directly to His Son words of pride and love. It should not escape our notice that immediately after this moment of public praise and power, Jesus is led into a season of solitude and FASTING...

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” (Matthew 4:1-2 ESV)

Jesus fasted. Let that sink in for a moment. When we question what reasons exist for fasting, the fact that the perfect Son of God, who we follow, did so should be reason enough. And yet, why did our Savior choose to deny himself food? What was his motive? We know from the text that Jesus has experienced a very public expression of praise from his heavenly Father. Now he is being led into the wilderness for a very private experience and test. After forty days of fasting and prayer, Satan, the adversary of all who would serve God, comes and attempts to disqualify him from the cross and to derail God’s plan of salvation. It is clear from the timing that the devil aims his attack for a moment when Jesus is physically weak and hungry. But here’s the beautiful irony: Satan comes to Jesus when he knows he has been fasting; but Jesus has been fasting because he knows that Satan is coming.

Fasting, for Jesus, was not an empty religious ritual, but a powerful weapon to lay hold of as he walked upon this earth. The self-denial that left him physically weak was a means of being spiritually strong. His time spent suppressing the desires of the flesh and drawing near to the presence of his Father prepared him to pursue the course that was set before him. As we follow in his footsteps, may we view fasting as a means of denying the physical that we might focus on the spiritual, seeking the face of our heavenly Father and gaining strength to walk the path he has set before us.

Reflection:

How do you hope this experience of fasting will help you grow in your walk with God?

**Morning Devotion: to read Friday morning when you wake up
*Read Deuteronomy 8:1-3***

After wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, Israel is encamped on the east side of the Jordan river with the Promised Land waiting on them. As they wait and anticipate, Moses recounts the law, the commandment, the words that God had given to them at Sinai 40 years earlier. In the middle of this remedial session on God’s commandments, Moses reflects on their wilderness experience. He reminds them that God used the sojourn to test their hearts and to teach them lessons they needed to know. Foremost among those lessons is this from verse three:

“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Deuteronomy 8:3 ESV)

In the midst of the passage we read last night, Satan tried to tempt Jesus to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into loaves of bread. In response, Jesus uses the Scripture above to help fight and defeat Satan’s temptation. By quoting these very words from Deuteronomy, Jesus reminds us that the hunger we experience as we fast is not something we should seek to avoid or escape; rather, it is meant to lead us to feast on the Word of God.

Today and every Friday during this season as you strive to fast, be assured that the temptation will come to either forsake your fast altogether or to indulge your appetite in some other way. Now, you probably won’t try to turn stones into bread, but you will be tempted to eat from the other tables that the world sets before you. You might find yourself enticed to take the edge off your appetite through entertainment or through mindless scrolling on your phone; or perhaps you will be tempted to dull your hunger by shopping, or playing video games, or binge-watching a new show, or by simply grabbing a nap. The options are endless, but the bottom line is that you will be tempted to turn anywhere but God’s Word. So resolve this morning that when your stomach starts growling you will not turn to what the world sets before you, but that instead, you will run to the life giving Word of God.

Reflection:

*What “table” do you think you will be most tempted to turn to during your fast?
Stop and pray that God would help you instead to pick up his Word and feed your soul.*

Mid-Day Devotion: to read Friday at lunchtime

“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.” (Nehemiah 9:1-3 ESV)

If you read through the passages in the Bible that speak of fasting, you will see that this practice is almost always accompanied by prayer; especially prayers of personal confession. This makes sense when you stop to think about it. We often find that as we humble ourselves before God and denying our flesh, God helps us to clearly see the sin that still resides in our hearts. He might show us pockets of pride or give us glimpses of self-centeredness that we were blind to before. He may reveal sins that we’ve hidden from others or that have been a part of our heritage for generations. Prayer, then, is a means of expressing what God exposes through fasting. As we intentionally lift our eyes from our earthly appetites to focus on God and to draw near to Him, prayer helps us (in the words of Hebrews 12:1) to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely” so that we might “run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

As you draw near to God and he grants you a greater awareness of sin in your life, remember that the Spirit's aim in uncovering sin is to lead you to conviction, not condemnation. These sins are meant to be confessed and laid at the cross, where Jesus paid for them in full, so that we can be cleansed of that which dims our view of God or dulls our affections for him.

Reflection: 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Set aside some time to talk with God, asking him to search your heart and reveal areas where there is a need for confession. Then ask God to help you not only admit those sins, but to turn away from them in true repentance.