

## **Taking Your Concerns to a New Level**

(sermon for November 6, 2011)

By Dr. David R. Mains

**Text:** Nehemiah 1:4.

**Subject:** People carrying extreme burdens.

**Desired Response:** Consider fasting.

**How To:** Numerous suggestions provided.

**How Long:** Pray about what God would have you do in the upcoming 40 days of fasting.

**Sermon in a Sentence:** People carrying extreme burdens should seriously consider fasting.

By all outward appearances, Nehem had it made. He hobnobbed in the top echelon of society. He held an important job with all the associated perks. Not only was he highly respected, he was also well-liked.

But those who knew him more intently were aware that he also manifested a deep hurt. Underneath his congenial outward appearance he carried an extreme burden that more than once brought him to tears. In his own words he “mourned for days.”

Before this sermon is finished, I’ll tell you more of Nehem’s story. I bring it up here at the start of my remarks because my words today concern others like him who carry a heavy spiritual weight of one kind or another.

You fit my target group if you’re especially anxious about the welfare of someone you love ... if you want God to either answer an often-repeated prayer request or release you from the strain of having to carry it ... if you feel under constant enemy bombardment ... if you seek assurance regarding the Lord’s thoughts about a major decision ... if you have an intense desire for the Lord to show Himself sufficient in terms of meeting a pressing need ... or if you fit into one of an endless number of similar circumstances.

Have you ever wondered whether there was some special way you could get God’s attention when all else failed? The answer is yes. Such an ultimate appeal is available. And what I have to share has both biblical and historical credence.

Why not consider fasting?

“Fasting?”

That’s right, fasting.

“You mean—uh—going without food for a while?”

Right, and at the same time giving yourself to intense prayer.

“I don’t know. That sounds almost like when the doctor prescribes a cure that’s worse than the sickness! In fact, didn’t they used to fast in sackcloth and ashes? You’re certainly not going to include that, I hope!”

No.

“Ach, it all sounds terrible. Here I am listening to you and also thinking about lunch, and now I’ll probably feel guilty. Thanks a whole lot, Pastor!”

Well, I’ve been working all week on this message, and it seems all I’ve been able to think about is food. So I understand your feelings a little. Nevertheless, I believe I have a word from the Lord for us.

Fasting is a means of saying, “God, I want You to know I have strong feelings about this matter.” Quite often, fasting is revealed in the Bible as a means of resolving otherwise extremely difficult cases. Didn’t Jesus Himself imply as much when His disciples questioned Him as to why they couldn’t heal the boy who, when having fits, often threw himself into the fire?

Some people fast regularly just as a discipline, and I think that’s commendable. Such a practice helps maintain control over one’s appetites. Our bodies are normally wonderful servants, but they can also become masters. By fasting, we choose to control those inner cravings, as opposed to allowing them to be in control. During such periods, when the stomach groans for satisfaction, it’s told, “No, you are my servant, not my master. I tell you what to do. You don’t dictate to me.” Such discipline, of course, aids not only self-control, but builds personal confidence as well.

What I’m referring to, however, is fasting for the purpose of expressing strong feelings. It’s as if to say, “God, I want you to know I’m extremely serious about this matter.” Fasting is to praying what underlining or exclamation marks are to writing. Fasting not only turns the volume way up, it says, “Pay close attention to what I’m saying, because it’s of extreme importance to me.”

These strong feelings don’t have to always be about a problem. It’s just as appropriate to pray, “Father in heaven, you’ve been so good to me, I can’t even begin to express how appreciative I am. That’s why I’m fasting today—so you’ll know for sure that my heart is literally filled with gratitude.”

For some reason, fasting also has unusual power to break up spiritual log-jams. It’s central to the outcome of the Esther story. Daniel utilizes it effectively. The psalmist writes, “My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt.” But Psalm 109 ends on a high note: “With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord.”

Jesus began His public ministry with 40 consecutive days without food and came forth from the wilderness victorious and with great power.

“Sorry, pastor. It was a good try,” you say, “but I tried it once and it didn’t work.”

Wait. Don’t you understand, that’s one of the good aspects about conducting such a discipline. Fasting releases you from the anxiety of wondering whether or not God has heard. For me there’s a certain satisfaction in being able to say, “For right now, anyway, I’ve done as much as I can do, and I’m content to leave this matter in God’s hands.”

But I also want to quickly add that if God didn’t act as you wanted, it’s unusual, because if it’s at all possible, He will respond when people fast.

Reduced to a sentence, my sermon could be summed up as follows: People with extreme burdens should consider fasting. Again, people with extreme burdens should consider fasting.

This was the case with the Egyptian Christians I told you about last Sunday. They declared a 40-day fast at the end of 2010. This doesn’t mean that thousands of believers all fasted for 40 days ... maybe some did. But literally thousands of Christians participated in one way or another during that 40-day period. And I’m sure they would say the Lord answered their prayers in a manner far and beyond anything they could have imagined.

Apart from the multitude of conversions I told you about, when January 1 of this year came, the revolution that was going on in Libya inflamed decades of wrong that had also marked Egypt. As you know, demonstrators took to the streets, and after 18 days of protests, the unbelievable happened. Then-President Mubarak stepped down. In March a set of constitutional amendments was approved by a record number of Egyptian voters, and the story continues.

As I explained last Sunday, a similar 40-day fast has now been called for by religious leaders in this country. It’s scheduled to begin just two weeks from tomorrow, on Monday, November 21. During that time of prayer and fasting, Christians will be asking God to bring a spiritual awakening to this country. We will also be praying intensely for our Christian brothers and sisters in Egypt, where many questions are still up in the air ... and for all the Middle Eastern countries ... including Israel ... for the Kingdom of God in other places of the world for which people are concerned ... AND for personal burdens you carry that have just gotten too heavy to pick up day after day. This is a time we’re asking in a concerted way for God’s help. Does that sound like something in which you would like to participate?

Allow me to remind you again of my key sentence: People carrying extreme burdens should seriously consider fasting.

Let me share several practical considerations:

- (1) Break in slowly. Don’t attempt too much too soon. That’s why I suggested that you abstain from food for just one meal last week. This week, why not stretch that to two meals? Then you’ll have a little experience for when God might lead you to fast an entire day—24 hours—or even longer.

- (2) Refrain only from eating solid food unless you feel strongly otherwise. The body can do without food more easily than it can go without liquids. That's why many people still drink water or juices while fasting. Others choose broth, but you're probably better off to avoid stimulants such as coffee or tea.
- (3) Realize the importance of concerted prayer along with the matter of not eating. Fasting includes both aspects.
- (4) If you're on medication, or have a physical problem such as hypoglycemia or diabetes, it's important that your doctor gives consent before you fast. If he or she has reservations, enter a pact with a friend. You pray and have him or her refrain from eating. Where there's a will, there's a way.
- (5) Don't make a big deal about what you're doing. The Pharisees became targets of Jesus' criticism because they usually made sure everyone knew what was going on. This doesn't mean, however, that you dare not open your mouth. If your spouse would normally be fixing a meal, certainly it doesn't jeopardize the endeavor to say, "Sweetheart, I'm planning on fasting tomorrow, if you don't mind."
- (6) And maybe most importantly, the best way to learn about fasting is by fasting. Experience is a great teacher. And fasting when any number of friends are sharing in the experience is a wonderful time to learn.

I began this sermon by telling you about Nehem. Like with today's Egyptian believers, it was a national matter that had affected him so profoundly. Nehem, or Nehemiah, was Jewish and served as cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, head of the massive Persian empire that had defeated the Babylonians. He writes:

*While I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.*

You need to understand that about a dozen years earlier, Ezra had returned to Jerusalem with several thousand fellow Jews. So Nehemiah wanted to know how things were going. The news wasn't good.

*They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disguise. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."*

*When I heard this (writes Nehemiah), I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the Lord of heaven.*

This short prelude is little more than an introduction to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Thrilling stories to Nehemiah's time of prayer and fasting follow—miracle provisions, divine protection, great works accomplished in the midst of persecution, God's Word being read

again in public in Jerusalem and bringing conviction and confession. The reinstating of Jewish festivals, a new covenant and the dedication of a solid wall now surrounding the holy city.

Why not read the 13 chapters of Nehemiah this week if you haven't done so already? But do it in the context of asking yourself whether or not we, too, need such a revival. If you have an unshakeable conviction that the answer is yes, then you feel what I feel, and you can receive my thoughts on fasting, not just as a message about an interesting topic, or some words from the Lord to apply exclusively to your personal situation, but as an almost desperate means of getting God's attention at a critical juncture in the continuing story of His cause here in this land and beyond.

For the most part, Christians here have lived lives of relative ease. I believe now is a time God Himself is challenging many of us to take our faith to a new level. Fasting and praying is one of the early challenges God is now asking of us. Let's face it, this is nothing compared to what our brothers and sisters in the faith in other lands have been challenged to do.

People with extreme burdens should consider fasting. It could work miracles again—and if not, what a joy to know that together we went to the limits that praying affords.