

ST MARK'S NORTHBRIDGE WEEK OF PRAYER & FASTING BACKGROUND INFORMATION



For a few years now at St Mark's we have started the year of ministry with a Week of Prayer and Fasting. A dedicated time of prayer is pretty straightforward, especially as we commit our plans and desires to God before sinking our energy into making it all happen. Clearly, unless he blesses our efforts, they won't come to much (Psalm 127:1-2).

But a time of fasting is less obvious, as fewer Christians and churches practice fasting, and also because less is said about fasting in the Bible than about prayer. So, what's the deal with fasting, and how can we make the most of a week of prayer *and* fasting here at St Mark's.

1. What does the Bible teach about fasting?

In the Bible the regular appointed way for seeking God is via prayer. As the Apostle Paul says, we are to "not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

However, there are times in the life of a believer or a church when the concerns and needs assume serious or significant proportions. Situations become urgent and important. The Old and New Testaments are full of examples of people who faced such critical points and fasted as they sought God in fervent prayer over a period of time. Jesus and Moses both fasted for 40 days in their ministry for spiritual power and wisdom. Daniel fasted for 10 days in response to the needs of his people. David spent a week in prayer and fasting as he mourned over his sin.

It is true that fasting is not commanded in the Bible in the same way as prayer is, but it does appear to be assumed of believers as a part of their Christian walk on at least some occasions. Matthew 6:17-18 says, "when you fast..."; that is, Jesus did not say, "if you fast" but rather, "when you fast". In other words, he assumes it is part of his disciple's regime rather than commands us to do so. And he instructs us not to draw undue attention to our deprivation when we fast.

When questioned about fasting in Matthew 9 (and parallel passages in Mark 2 and Luke 5) Jesus said that fasting is appropriate when the bridegroom (i.e. Jesus himself) is not with us. Fasting then reminds us that a feast with him awaits us, we are not there yet, and so we hunger with hope for that future when his kingdom is ushered in with abundance. We remind ourselves that in the meantime we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God.

At key times in the early church people fasted and prayed at times of gospel initiative (Acts 9:9, 13:1-3, 14:23). So as we begin a new year of ministry at St Mark's, what we hope is a year of gospel initiative, we dedicate ourselves to the Lord and call on him to do great things in and through us as we fast and pray.

2. What attitude should I adopt?

There are heart attitudes to bring to a time of fasting. It is an act of dedication to God, an offering of ourselves to him. It is recorded of the prophetess Anna, “And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayers” (Luke 2:37b). Her fasting is recorded as service to God. As we begin ministry this year we bring our bodies into his service (Romans 12:1-2).

Fasting is furthermore a self-humbling act in which we confess we have no reason for pride (remember the warning in Matthew 6:17-18 about taking public pride in fasting). A time of fasting will reveal to us how quickly we look to physical and material comforts to make us feel better, and it will reveal how we rely on God in all of life, which is why it is so closely tied to prayer (after all, fasting without prayer is just a crash diet). David prays in Psalm 35:13-14, “Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting”. Fasting is the outward expression of inner submission, weakness and even brokenness. When we engage in fasting, we are declaring that we cannot help ourselves, and that God is our only resource. We seek his wisdom, renewal and power, none of which we can achieve in our own strength.

3. How do I fast?

The normal word for “fast” means to go without food. People might give up certain things like chocolate or alcohol or technology during the time of Lent, but fasting actually means abstaining from food. There is a profound connection between physical hunger and yearning for God’s presence.

Some possible ways to fast include:

- Fast from all food for a day or two (or more)
- Fast during certain meals (e.g. breakfast and lunch) for the week of prayer and fasting
- Fast from all but the basics such as bread and water

There are no strictures on how to fast, and some people should probably not fast (for medical reasons, parenting demands, etc, in which case abstaining from other things like technology or shopping might be good). And we don’t think our young people with their growing bodies and minds should be fasting either. But work out for yourself under God the type of fast you will undertake depending on your needs and responsibilities.

4. Anything else to keep in mind?

The key connection in the week of prayer and fasting is that our fasting deepens our prayers. We might have more time to pray, and will be more conscious of our weakness and need for God. So work out when you will pray. You might be able to pray when you would otherwise be eating meals.

Don’t try to be a hero or martyr, which is what Jesus warned of in Matthew 6. Keep taking any medication, exercise moderately, expect some physical and mental discomfort (it will likely come and go in waves).

But also expect God to answer your prayers. If we are sincerely humble, repentant and seeking of God’s favour, we can expect to experience a heightened awareness of his presence with us. We can look forward to fresh spiritual insights and a renewed confidence and faith in God.

How is it going to work?

We will launch the Week of Prayer and Fasting in our services this Sunday, but the week itself will run mid-week from Monday 5 to Friday 9 February. Each day there will be at least a couple of prayer meetings to come to, at church and online, as follows:

Monday 5 February

- **Morning prayer (7.30-8.00am): In church;** with special focus on healing, caring for ageing parents, young children, etc
- **Lunchtime prayer (1:00-1:30pm): Online;** with special focus on healing, caring for ageing parents, young children, etc
(<https://us05web.zoom.us/j/4430355970?omn=83420498983>)
Meeting ID: 4430355970, Passcode: Prayer 24

Tuesday 6 February

- **Lunchtime prayer (1.00-1:30pm): Online:**
(<https://us05web.zoom.us/j/4430355970?omn=84750446205>)
Meeting ID: 4430355970, Passcode: Prayer 24
- **Evening (7:30-9:00pm): In church,** Alpha training and prayer

Wednesday 7 February

- **Lunchtime prayer (1.00-1.30pm): Online**
(<https://us05web.zoom.us/j/4430355970?omn=83986156798>)
Meeting ID: 4430355970, Passcode: Prayer 24
- **Evening (7.30-8.30pm): In hall,** Whole church prayer night

Thursday 8 February

- **Morning prayer (7.30-8:00am): In church:** special focus on family members not walking with the Lord
- **Lunchtime prayer (1.00-1.30pm): Online**
(<https://us05web.zoom.us/j/4430355970?omn=82603801356>)
Meeting ID: 4430355970, Passcode: Prayer 24

Friday 9 February

- **Lunchtime prayer (1.00-1.30pm): Online,** special focus on schools and young people
(<https://us05web.zoom.us/j/4430355970?omn=81569423584>)
Meeting ID: 4430355970, Passcode: Prayer 24
- **At Alive:** for Alive members

What do you want from me?

Some of us will be able to be involved more in the Week of Prayer and Fasting, and some less so. We don't want you to feel guilty for what you can't do, and want you to feel joy in what you can do. But for starters:

- Give fasting a go in some form across the week. I personally plan to fast from all food across some days, and have one simple meal on other days, depending on the requirements of the day
- Aim to join in for at least one of the corporate prayer meetings. If you can come to more, all the better!
- Use the list of prayer points for focussed private prayers. You might also like to use the prayer points in your households, with housemates, spouses and/or children.

I commend our week of prayer and fasting to you, in Jesus' name, and I look forward to seeing what God will do in us and through us as a result of this week.

Scott Petty
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