

[Practicing Faith, Part Two]

[Speakers in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[EMSB Theme Intro]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 20 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB Theme fades out]

All right, well, this episode is part two of a three-part series. It represents a number of teachings I did back when I was a pastor at Door of Hope, about some of the key spiritual practices that have marked the life habits of followers of Jesus from all spiritual church traditions throughout most of church history. And that's because they're actually grounded in the life and teaching of Jesus and the apostles that we find in the New Testament.

And so this is a teaching about the twin practices and habits of fasting— withholding food from yourself for a symbolic, intentional reason and period of time—but also the habit of the opposite: of intentional feasting and celebration because of one's commitment to Jesus. So what are these habits? How do they balance with each other? What do they each mean? And why is it important to have both going on in some kind of rhythm in your life? So that's what this teaching explores. I hope it's helpful for you. Let's go for it.

[Musical Break (2:02—2:07)]

Anyway, Luke chapter 4. We're in the middle of this series called "Spiritual Symmetry." And we've taken the second half of the summer, and we're exploring what have been the habits, the practices, that marked the life of Jesus, that marked the life of the earliest followers of Jesus and Christians throughout history—the habits and the practices that have made their lives what they are: lives marked by growth and transformation.

And in terms of the heart of the series and what's behind it, I think there's been an analogy that's come to my mind that's kind of helped me get my mind around why we're doing this.

Maybe think of a couple that's been married a long time that you know and that you really respect. You really look up to them. It seems like they have just a really powerful connection, and they've been together a really long time.

And odds are, if, you know, you were to go talk to them and look “under the hood” of their relationship, so to speak, the odds are very high that it didn't just happen randomly. Odds are that there have been years of this couple intentionally making choices to weave habits into their life and their calendars, and so on—about how they spend time together and how they recreate together—talking and just habits. Actual practices: things that they do that isn't just “magic romance”—because you know that only lasts about a year or so, you know? Or however long it lasts, and then it's sort of, like, just the day-to-day of life together. And this is true in relationships in general. Habits and practices—rhythms and routines—in a healthy relationship actually serve to keep the connection vital.

And it's no different in being a Christian. Just think of a Christian—somebody that you look up to who's a Christian. They've been a Christian for a long time, and they're just super wise, and they're godly, and they act like Jesus all the time. And you're just like, “Holy cow, who is this person?” The odds are very high that if you peek under the hood of their life, so to speak, you will see an intentional series of habits or practices that this person engages in to keep that connection vital and real in their journey of following Jesus.

And so that's what this series is about. It's about: what are these practices? And there's actually not very many. And there's actually a lot of similarities in more people's lives you look at through history. And so we're looking at Jesus, the New Testament, and the historic practices of the church for this very purpose: keeping this connection vital with Jesus over time.

So today we're going to look at the biblical and historic practices of feasting and fasting. Feasting and fasting—so choosing not to eat *or* choosing to eat a whole bunch with friends and family. Obviously, they're very different. They're completely opposite behaviors. But in biblical perspective, both of these choices—to not eat or to eat a whole bunch with friends and family—these are capable of being deeply spiritual experiences if they get woven into a series of habits and practices over a long period of time.

Now, let me just say a caveat—I should never do this as a teacher, preacher, whatever it is that I'm doing right now—it's going to be the most emotionally moving message that I've ever given in my life, but I've been waiting for this day to heave this message on you. Because—particularly fasting—I have come to see an area of, just, being a Christian that I now see that I have actually misunderstood, deeply misunderstood, for a lot of years. And because I've misunderstood it, I just haven't really done it. I thought it was odd. I thought it was kind of weird. And I've done it sporadically, and even when I'm doing it, I'm wondering, “Why it is that I'm choosing not to eat for a long period of time? Like, what's this really about?” And I had some reasons that I thought were kind of, whatever...

But, you know, when Josh said we're going to do the series, and—“Oh, you should do the message on fasting.” And I was like, “Dang it. *Dang*.” Because now I have to think through it and read about it, and learn and study everything the Bible has to say about it—and I just . . . I don't know what to do, but at least now we're all going to not know what to do after I'm done talking, right?

So just to put that ball in your court. If fasting's kind of a normal part of how you are a Christian, and you've woven that into your life, that's awesome. I really look up to you. That's not where I'm at, but it's where I've realized I need to be. Okay, that's my little caveat. Luke, chapter 4. Let's just dive right in and see what happens here. Luke, chapter 4.

Now, we looked at this chapter a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Jesus's practice of solitude. And I just want us to pay attention to something before we read the first sentences of Luke 4, just to remind you. We did this a couple of weeks ago. So Luke 4 comes after Luke 3, right? We're not learning anything. So what is at the end of Luke, chapter 3? Look at—we see a long list of names. Luke provides us a genealogy, a heritage of Jesus. And right before that genealogy is a crucial story in the life of Jesus, and it's the story of his baptism by John the Baptist, in the Jordan River.

And so this is the story where Jesus is, kind of, ushered onto the stage of history—in public, for everyone. This was a crucial moment, this baptism in Jesus's story. Every single one of the four accounts of Jesus's life in the New Testament has this moment narrated for us. And in the story, it's the key—hinge—because after this moment, Jesus is publicly, kind of, recognized and identified as the Son of God.

And the love—the voice from Heaven, the Father—and the love from the Father is communicated through the Spirit. It's the three-in-one God stuff going on. And then from this moment forward, Jesus moves on into His mission to announce and bring the Kingdom of God, and so on.

But the first thing that Jesus does, right after this significant life-direction-shaping moment—first thing Jesus does is in chapter four, which is: *not going into public*. Just the opposite. We're told in chapter four that Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, “He left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil, and he ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them, he was hungry.”

Yes, yes, he was, right? You eat nothing for forty days . . . I joked about this a couple weeks ago, but it's true. This is quite bizarre behavior. If you had *any* friend of yours who, who maybe had a powerful kind of spiritual experience, or was really impacted by a gathering of church, or something, and then just said, “Hey, I'm going to eastern Oregon, taking no food with me for forty days. See you later.” You know, you would be really concerned. You would do an intervention, or something like that. It's very bizarre.

But that's precisely what Jesus does. He takes off. He has this life-defining moment—right?—of the river and the presence and the power of the Father and the Spirit. And this is going to set the trajectory for the next three years, leading right up to the cross and the resurrection. And the first thing Jesus does is go be by himself and not eat for forty days.

Don't be like, “Weird Bible person”—like, “Oh, he's Jesus. He does stuff like that.” Like, no. That's weird. Like, why did he do that? Forty days without eating? Why would anybody do that? That's strange, right? And if you don't think that's strange, it just shows that you're just used to the Bible, or whatever—which is great. That's good, but it's strange. Like, it's weird. Why would somebody do that?

And why Jesus does this—there's a number of reasons, I think—and the first thing to pay attention to is that he's actually not the first person to have done this in the story of Israel.

There's actually—he's actually the third. He's the third of the great prophets of Israel who, after a very powerful, significant moment—a sacred moment—retreats to the wilderness, or to go be by themselves for forty days without eating at all. Jesus is the third of a series of prophets to do this.

Can you guess the first? Remember the first? It's good Bible trivia. Anybody? Moses. Moses. So allow me to show you, on a handy, dandy, little chart right here: the practice of fasting—of not eating—for twenty-four hours, a few days, or whatever, or longer—the practice of fasting is mentioned about thirty times in the Bible—thirty stories, or thirty passages, that mention fasting. The very first one, the first person to fast in the whole Bible is Moses. There it is: Exodus 34.

And God empowered Moses to free and lead the Israelites out of slavery, and to come to the foot of this mountain, Mount Sinai, and God's personal presence and glory came down on the mountain in cloud and thunder, and so on. And then Moses, alone, goes up the mountain, directly into God's presence, and he does the Ten Commandments, and that whole thing—you've seen the movie. But what does Moses do as a response to going up into God's presence? He doesn't eat for *forty* days, as he's there in the presence of God on the mountain.

The prophet Elijah—you may be familiar with the story—Elijah lived at a time when most of the Israelites were not following Yahweh at all. They were following after a Canaanite god, named "Baal" or "Baal." And so Elijah thought this was just unbearable, and so he challenged all the prophets of this god to a showdown on this mountain—do you know this story? It's kind of one of the famous biblical stories. And so, God appears by fire to consume a sacrifice, and so on. And everyone's like, "Oh, holy cow. God just showed up in a big way." And what is Elijah's response? After that *major* appearance of God's presence? He retreats into the desert to fast for forty days.

And Jesus does exactly the same thing. The Father [interjecting a comment on visual aids]—sorry for that. Man, we just . . . every time, the formatting just isn't quite right—anyway, Jesus's Father—no, the Father's supposed to be over there, so the Father reveals Jesus at the Jordan River.

But the whole point is that—just look at this. Look at this right here. So whatever you think about fasting, or whatever you think you know about fasting, just kind of put that aside for a moment, and let's just look here. And if all we had were these three stories about fasting—about somebody in the Bible not eating—what would we learn about the purpose or meaning of this practice, this very ancient practice?

So are we told that Jesus is praying about anything in particular? Are we told that Jesus is asking for anything? Is he asking God for anything? Are we told that in Luke 4? Nope. Does Elijah ask for anything in the desert there? Does Moses? You read these stories and, as they're fasting for forty days, there's nothing they're trying to accomplish.

I think many of us, if you have any perception of what fasting is about at all—it's certainly the perception that I had from my, kind of, exposure to it, or whatever—is that fasting is this thing that you do when there's something really crazy or critical or important happening in your life—there's some prayer requests that you need an answer to—and "I need to show God that I'm really serious, and that I really mean it. I really mean it, mean it, mean it, so I'm gonna not eat. God, you better make something happen, happen here."

That's kind of a caricatured way of talking about it, but I think that's the way most of us think about fasting. It's a results-oriented view: "I'm going to do this to show God I'm serious so that He will answer my prayer." And that is *not at all* what's going on here. In fact, these guys aren't trying to accomplish *any* results. What you see is just the opposite.

So maybe think of it this way. I think what's happening here in this story—all of them have this in common—that all of these people had a powerful experience of God's presence in their lives. I'm going to call that "a sacred moment"—a unique moment or event or season in their lives, that was marked by an awareness of the presence of God—a sacred, holy presence—and that this was a life-shaping, transforming experience. And then what you see in each case is that fasting—choosing to *not* eat—is a response to that sacred moment. It's a response.

Now, there are some times, in the thirty-some-odd examples of fasting in the Bible where, after someone responds to a sacred moment by fasting, something remarkable happens. There is a result. And we're going to look—I'm going to show you examples of this. But there are just as many cases where people are fasting, and they're not asking God for anything at all. Which shows that the heart of what this practice is all about is actually not about trying to get results. The heart of this practice is, somehow, about having a physical, embodied experience. In some way, trying to respond and process "what on earth just happened to me" and what I sense that God is up to in my life.

And as I read and learned about fasting and really looked at all the examples in the Bible—one, I was just disappointed that it's taken me eighteen years as a Christian to figure this out. I was like, "Dang it, really? Okay, well—here we go. It's always a new day, you know? So let's just move forward." I realized that this is a really profound and meaningful practice. It was clearly very meaningful to Jesus. And fasting has been, like, a staple—just, a regular habit of Christians throughout history.

In terms of modern church history, I was astounded to learn this: it's been the church in America over the last 100 years that has primarily, and just, stopped the practice of fasting in a widespread, consistent way. Most Christians around most of the world, for most of history, have thought that this is a crucially important part of being a disciple of Jesus. And that was news to me—and if it's news to you, there you go. Now you can see why I've been so bothered all week long.

So here's what I want to do. Again, this won't be an emotionally moving talk, but all the examples of fasting—if you look at them all—you can kind of put them into three buckets. And as you look at the three types, there's three "big" types of situations: why people fast, what are the reasons behind it, [and] what are the meanings behind it. And as you look at all three of those—which we're going to do, just for a few minutes—this is a *really* significant practice. I think, were I to adopt it—right, which I have a plan to—it seems to me this could be a very meaningful, significant practice in our lives.

There's no one passage in the Bible that talks—that defines why you fast, or that tells you the meaning of it. What you have to do is look at all of the places that people do it and look at the circumstances of why and when, and what are the reasons, and what are the meaning, and as you reflect on that, then you can kind of make some big picture observations, and what it means for us. So that's what we're going to do, and then we're going to look at feasting connected to it. You guys ready for action?

So what we see here is this pattern. These three guys, they fast as a response. God's presence becomes real and tangible to them. There's a "sacred moment," and their response is to simply not eat. And all three of these fit into a larger pattern that—actually, there's a number of other examples of it—and this is what I call the "crossroads moment" fast, or the "defining moment" fast.

And here's another example in Acts, chapter 13. I'll read it, and then we'll kind of reflect on it. So we read, "While the church at Antioch was worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I've called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and then sent them off."

Here's a church—this local church community, you know—that meets in the city of Antioch, and they are doing their weekly worship, and so on. But it also involves fasting, because, you know, that's just what Christians do, right? They just fast. That's just a part of what it means to be a Christian. It's just presented as an assumption here.

And then we're not told *how*, but we're told somehow the Holy Spirit began to influence this community, or people in this community, so that it became clear: two guys in the midst of the church community, Paul and Barnabas, they have a whole new chapter of their life that's about to open up. There's these two people, Paul and Barnabas—they have come to a crossroads moment in their lives, and the Holy Spirit indicates that. They all become aware of that.

And so what's their response to the fact that Paul and Barnabas are at a defining moment, and they're about to start a whole new journey together that's different than what they've been doing up to this point? And what's their response when they become aware of the fact that God's guiding their life in a new way? *They fast.*

"After they had fasted and prayed"—*boom*, they send them off. It's the same pattern again. They become aware of God's presence—His guiding. It's a transition moment in life—and God's behind it, influencing, opening opportunities, and so on—and *boom*, here they go.

And here's what's interesting about this example right here: what happens is one of the most remarkable events in church history. It's one of the first missionary journeys in Christian history. They go all over the ancient Mediterranean, and they share the story of Jesus. And they plant all of these churches and Jesus communities all over, and it becomes the growing network of the Christian church in that part of the world. It's a remarkable result. So there is a result that happens.

But the question is, were they praying and trying to get this result? And if you actually read the story, it doesn't seem like that. What it seems like is [that] they became aware that God had marked these two people's lives and was opening a new opportunity for them. So what should you do? How do you respond to that kind of thing? Will you stop eating for a day? Which, I'm guessing, for most of us, is kind of like . . .

So we might think, "Well, I'd like pray or journal about it, or something." Or we'll go have a prayer meeting, or something. But their response is like, "Yeah, we're not going to eat for twenty-four hours." After this kind of dawned on them, and they realized this. What's going on? And I think this type of fast—we're not told that they're praying or asking for anything. They're just responding to this awareness that God is involved in their life in a new and dramatic way, changing the course of their lives.

So what does fasting mean in this kind of experience? So think about this with me: in twenty years, what will you be doing on August 3, 2034? And the answer to that question for every one of us is: we have no clue whatsoever. You have no idea what you're going to be doing in twenty years—kind of. But then again, if you think about it, you actually know for sure at least one thing that you will be doing. You will eat. You will eat a meal. I predict it. I'm a prophet, and I predict that you're going to eat a meal. You're also probably going to go to the bathroom, and you're probably going to go to sleep, you know—that day or night, or whatever.

So, in other words, eating—think of this: there's very few things that you do nearly every single day of your life for your entire life. Like, that list is really small, you know what I'm saying? But eating is one of them. Eating is just one of the most universal, routine habits and practices. And if someone is in a situation where they don't have access to food for a day, they're very, very aware that they don't have access to food that day. You know what I'm talking about? So whether you are able to find a meal or whether you're not able to find a meal, you're very aware that this is an important part of your daily life.

Now, there's something significant then. Think about what a bold interruption it is to voluntarily just say, "I'm not going to eat for twenty-four hours." Like, that is so *not natural*. You know what I'm saying? Like, that is so interruptive in your life. And it seems to me that's at least part of what's happening here.

These are moments in these individuals' lives that came as, like, "divine interruptions" and just reset the course of their lives. What's an appropriate way to respond to my life being totally changed and transitioned because of what God's doing in my life? And apparently, one of the appropriate responses is to *not eat*. It's this way of internalizing and embodying this interruption. It's like you're rebooting your life. You're rebooting your system.

Now, you might be thinking—at least, and I would be thinking—well, again, like, "I would just rather pray about it. Like, who . . . ? I don't want to give up eating for a day. Like, that seems really inconvenient," and so on. But what it shows is that I have this division in my mind, that it's like, "Oh, my spiritual life is about thinking and praying—right?—and learning, and things that I do. But what I do with my *body*, well, that's just different. That's just like bodily stuff." And that is completely foreign to the view of human beings in the Bible.

Our bodies are spiritual. Our bodies—the inner dimension and the outer dimension of us—are completely interwoven. And so in the biblical tradition, it's just a totally appropriate response. God intervenes in your life, He redirects it: don't eat. This is just natural, right? It just follows. And we're these modern, secularized Westerners. We're going, "That's so weird. It's like an experiment or something like that." No, it's just natural. It's embodying the fact that God is evolving our lives.

I think there's another piece of it, too—especially with the story of Jesus, I think this comes out—where: one of the things, when the devil, the presence of personal evil, comes to Jesus and tries to compel him to provide food for himself, and Jesus's response is that he says, "Humans don't live just by bread, but they live by the word of God."

In other words, fasting is a way of reminding and declaring your frailty as a human. And that, actually, you know, "Here we are," you know, we think we're making decisions and making life happen, and we got a five-year plan, or whatever, and so we're doing that. And then events

happen in your lives that just throw off your plan. And you realize, like, “Oh, I actually have very little control over my life whatsoever,” you know?

And like, those are disturbing moments for some of us, but they actually, they wake you up to something. They wake you up to the fact that I’m quite frail, and that I’m quite fragile, and that I really don’t have ultimate control over what the story of my life is about. And fasting is a way of embodying that frailty.

Because when you don’t eat, what do you think about, right? If you haven’t eaten for, like, over two days, you’re thinking about food quite a lot, and you’re reminded about how you entirely depend on things outside yourself to keep you alive. And it seems to me that’s at least part of the meaning of fasting in these moments.

So that’s the first bucket, right here: fasting in response to God redirecting the course of your life. How you guys doing? Okay, that’s number one. Now that’s probably just half a dozen examples or so in the Bible.

The second bucket is, by far, the vast majority. Most of the instances—if you just look up—if you Google “fasting” or “fasting in the Bible” and you look up all the examples, almost all of them will fit into the second bucket, right here. And this is what I call “turning from sinful choices” fast.

Here’s one example, almost pulled at random, from 1 Samuel 7, “So all of the people of Israel, they turned back to Yahweh.” This was after a season where they had been serving other gods. “And so Samuel said to all of the Israelites, ‘If you’re returning to Yahweh with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and commit yourselves to Yahweh and serve him only.’ Then the Israelites put away their idol gods. They served Yahweh only.”

Now, we might think right there, “Okay, cool. They’re cool. They turned, they repented, they said they’re sorry, they changed their behavior.” But no, it’s not cool yet. The story’s not over. There’s more that needs to happen in their response to this.

And so look what happens. “Samuel said, ‘Assemble all Israel at Mizpah. I will intercede with Yahweh for you.’ When they assembled at Mizpah on that day, they fasted. And there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against Yahweh.’” There’s a few other examples there, at the bottom, of people fasting when they’re turning from sinful decisions in their lives. The majority of the biblical examples are about this.

So you have people: they’re living their lives, and they’re making choices that they think are just fine. And then they, all of a sudden, have this awareness through some means—through someone talking to them, through whatever, the Scriptures or words from the prophet. They’d wake up—their conscience is awakened or something—and they realize, all of a sudden, like, “Oh my gosh. This is not okay. Like, what I’ve been doing that I thought was okay is totally not okay. The way I’ve been treating that person? Like, the way I’ve normally thought about money, or how I do *this* at work, or the way I do *this* in relationships—I thought that was just normal. That’s just how I did it, that’s how my friends did it. But it’s *wrong*, and I’m waking up to that fact.”

In the biblical tradition, when you wake up to that fact, how do you respond—what should you do? And the vast majority of examples of fasting in the Bible are that response, that response. In other words, becoming aware of how screwed up I am is viewed in this kind of umbrella category of God “messing with your life.” He’s waking you up to the truth of what he made

humanity for, and the kind of human he's called you to be. But then that's also a real act of grace, because if I can own that and actually turn to this God—Yahweh—his promise to me is to bring me towards growth and change if I keep in this attitude of repentance; keep in the mode of being a learner and confessing my sin and selfishness and so on.

And so that's viewed as a sacred moment. For a human being to finally, in this part of my life, say, "Yeah, I guess I'm not God. I guess I don't get to define good and evil in this part of my life. I need to let God define those terms, even if it seems weird to me." That's a sacred moment. It's a moment of openness to God's "messing with you" in your life.

And the appropriate part of the confession process—of saying out loud and naming what it is I've done—is fasting. They fasted. Most of the examples are just a twenty-four-hour fast, in the "turning from sin" fast. So what's going on here, again? So I think there's that interruption piece. I'm interrupting the most normal thing I do. I thought my life was just fine. Oh my gosh, it's not fine. I embody that experience by rebooting my whole body, so to speak, by not eating for a day.

There's another layer of meaning to fasting in this "turning from sinful choices" fast. And the prophet Joel unpacks this in a really powerful way in a little poem that he writes. He says, "'Even now,' declares the Lord"—this is Yahweh talking to the people of Israel—he says, "'Return to me with all of your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he's gracious, he's compassionate, he's slow to anger, abounding in covenant loyalty.'"

So we have this image here of repentance—of turning to God from my selfishness and sin—and we embody this. One of the appropriate responses is to not eat for a day. But notice—what is fasting connected with right here in the poem? What goes along with it, he says? So "weeping and mourning"—this sounds like a great time, right? So who wants to do this?

So in other words—but think about this. If you don't eat—if you've ever had the experience of not eating for a day, or if you've tried even more—multiple days—do people in your life tend to notice if you haven't eaten for two days—right? And what kinds of things might they notice about you if you have not eaten for two days? You know, you're going to be crabby. You're going to be irritable, kind of short, you know? Maybe a little . . . you know, that kind of thing. [Laughing] Not eating is lame. We're made to eat, all right? And not eating is doing something that brings not just inconvenience, but discomfort and grief, *grief* into our lives. I'm intentionally choosing to do something that brings my body grief. That's one layer of what fasting is.

And Joel's whole point here is like, "Yeah, exactly." When I become aware of things that I've done that have hurt myself—and that I've hurt other people—that's wrong. And to just glibly turn, like, "Okay, start a new leaf" or whatever? There's a moment—this is not about punishing yourself, but this is about grieving over the broken state of our world and over the broken state of my heart and mind that thought that this was an okay way to live.

And so there's an appropriate embodiment of that grief in fasting. Then you turn—right—to the Lord your God? And this form of fasting is connected with asking God for a result. Namely, that I be forgiven and given a new chance. And what is God's absolute promise to any of those who turn towards him? He's gracious; he's compassionate. He's just been waiting for you to come to him. He's right there to meet you.

So fasting, it's like this symbol—it's not just a symbol. It actually is an embodiment of this grief and of recognizing God's role in my life. This is very powerful. This is extremely powerful. [Laughing] I've never done this. I've never done this. This is, like—the majority of all of the times fasting is even mentioned in the Bible, this is the thing. And I've never done this.

[Laughing] I don't know if that bothers you—I'm your pastor. That bothered me. I was just like, "Holy cow. I clearly have been missing out on something right here. Would Jesus even recognize me as a Christian?" You know what I mean? Like, I don't know. I don't do these things that apparently are just part of, like, what God's people do. But anyway, whatever. There's a new day. I should fast. So anyways, that's this one: "turning from sinful choices" fast.

The last bucket. There's also quite a number of examples of this, too. It's kind of related to what I call the "tragic calamity" fast. It's when something horrible happens. It happens to me, it happens to somebody else, it happens in the world, it happens in my community. There's a tragedy. There's death, there's sickness. Something horrible happens. And how do you respond to that? And the appropriate response to that is to not eat. There are some events that take place that are so grievous, the only appropriate response is to just stop all normal operations of your life.

Look at how David talks about this in Psalm 35. David was a man who had a lot of people who wanted to kill him—a lot of people who hated him—and so he begins by talking about them. He says, "Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me. Fight against those who fight against me. May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame. May those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay."

And look what he says: "These are people that have repaid me evil for good. They leave me like one who is bereaved. Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning, as though for my friend or my brother."

This is *really* remarkable. So he's not even talking about somebody he likes. He's talking about somebody he doesn't like, who's, like, done something really horrible to him. But even David—his conscience, you know, was so soft that to watch sickness—in this case, sickness and tragedy—happen to any human being evoked something inside of him, like, "That's so screwed up." And what this form of fasting is about: embodying the grief, the appropriate grief, about the horrible, tragic things that happen in our world.

And it's very interesting, you know, to think about in the West. You know, like funeral practices—for example—in the West. I don't know if you've ever been to a funeral or memorial service, but very often, for close friends and family, after a memorial service, what do people usually go do? They usually go, like, have a hosted meal somewhere. I don't know if you've ever had this experience. I've had that experience before and just thought, like, that feels weird to me—but I don't know why.

And now I think I do know why. It's because—so, in biblical tradition, death is such a tragedy. Death is such a tragedy from what God intended and purposed for our world. Death is viewed as an enemy of God's good purposes in our world. And the only appropriate response to death and sickness and tragedy is to just stop eating. I can't act like anything's okay. And you take twenty-four hours and just fully embody that grief.

When Joseph died at the end of the book of Genesis, his family fasted for seven days. They had the whole country fast for seven days. It was such a tragedy and a moment of grief. And so you put your life on pause, and you acknowledge that grief. You acknowledge God's own grief at the state of his world in this experience of fasting.

Now notice also: Is David praying for anything when he's fasting? Look at what he says. Were his prayers answered? No, look at the last line, "My prayers were not answered." They didn't get better. The person died, or they were sick or something." In other words, when we're in this mode—this is a mode of fasting where we're pleading with God. "Bring your kingdom," you know—"Bring justice to our world. Bring healing or life to this person."

And there are times when that happens, and God does something remarkable as a result. But there are some times when it doesn't happen, and David's talking about it. Which, again, all goes back to the fact that the result is not really the thing. It's about us responding in an appropriate way to this sacred moment in our lives.

So those are the three big buckets of fasting, and they're all these layers of meaning: interrupting our lives and embodying the grief and interrupting normal patterns, and so on. But this—all of a sudden, it just dawned on me, like: this is a very powerful practice. I mean, I can only think that this would be a practice that would enrich my life in a deep way because you don't just not eat. Like, that's so extreme, right? But there are things that happen in our lives and in our world where that's an entirely appropriate response. And I think that's what these practices are trying to get at.

Take one more step with me before we're done. So what we're getting at here is that—notice all of these examples here are about—these are really serious sacred moments in our lives, right? Whether it's repenting from sin or lamenting over a tragedy or, you know, the course of my life's being redirected.

But there are also sacred moments that aren't grievous or serious. There are also sacred moments where God does stuff in our lives that is just pure grace and awesomeness, right?—where good things happen. And what should be the appropriate response when that happens? Should we stop eating? Just the opposite.

Look at verse twenty-seven of Luke chapter 5, "After this, Jesus went out, and he saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth." Tax collector—good guy, bad guy? Bad guy. Bad guy—first-century mafia, as I call them. So he's treasonous. He's Jewish, but he's betrayed his own people. But the Romans are just using him as a pawn, and he's filthy rich.

"Jesus said to him, 'Follow me.' Levi got up, left everything, and followed him." Who—like, what's the backstory there? You know? What's going on inside of this guy's mind and heart? He just responds to Jesus immediately. "Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house"—huge feast, large crowd of other first-century mafia and others eating with them.

But the Pharisees—the religious leaders and the teachers of the law who belong to their sect—they start complaining to Jesus's disciples, saying, "What? What are you doing . . ."—feasting, right?—"eating and drinking"—with these first-century mafia leaders—"tax collectors and sinners." And then, Jesus clearly overheard this, and then, always to the point, Jesus—"Jesus answered them, 'Listen, it's not healthy people who need a doctor, it's sick people. I haven't come to call the righteous, but rather sinners to repentance.'"

So Jesus—he’s out there in his mission of announcing the kingdom, and the most unlikely people in the world are turning to Jesus and are both owning up to their sin and selfishness and finding themselves transformed by an encounter with him. And so the parties ensue, right?

And so this becomes such a regular practice of Jesus that he starts getting criticized even more by these religious leaders. Look [at] what they say to him—next sentence. Verse thirty-three, “They said to him, ‘Listen, John’s disciples often fast and pray’”—talking about John the Baptist here—“A friend of yours, Jesus, John the Baptist—his disciples fast and pray all the time. And so do the disciples of the Pharisees. But yours go on feasting—eating and drinking.’

“Jesus answered”—[Laughing] Jesus, what?—“Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he’s with them?” Right? So they’re, like, talking about fasting and stuff, and Jesus starts talking about weddings. You’re just like, “What on earth?”

So “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he’s with them? Listen, the time will come when the bridegroom is taken from them, and they will fast.” [Laughing] That’s his response. That’s his response to them.

So in other words, they’re watching Jesus feast to celebrate all of these people who are finding life and finding the kingdom of God. And they criticize him because fasting and prayer were seen to be the right—and we looked through all these examples—like, yes, exactly—like, day-to-day life and, actually, fasting had become woven into the—as a weekly pattern of lots of contemporary Jews. They would fast—some of them even two days a week—Tuesdays and Thursdays.

And Jesus, all of a sudden, he just stops all of that. This is, like, what normal Jewish people are doing. And Jesus just stops, and all of a sudden, he just starts celebrating, and having all these parties with mafia leaders, right? And, just celebrating all these people who are finding the kingdom and finding him.

Now notice what Jesus says. Does Jesus say, like, “You know, fasting is just legalistic and you shouldn’t do that. And that’s, you know, like—that’s become a ritual that’s unhealthy.” Is that what Jesus says? It’s not what he says. What he says is, he says, “Listen, there’s a wedding on right now. There’s a wedding on—the bridegroom is here. All of the guests and friends are at the party. Is a wedding any time to, like, choose to not eat—are you kidding me?”

So no, this is a moment of grace. There’s a new family being created here, right? The new covenant family of Jesus’s people. And the bridegroom is here, and all of this partying is going on.

“Now, listen, listen: fasting is not appropriate right now,” Jesus says, “but is there coming again a time when fasting will be appropriate for all of those who have come around the bridegroom? Will fasting be appropriate one day in the future? Yup. Yup—when the bridegroom’s taken from them.”

[EMSB Theme Outro fades in]

All right, you guys, thanks for listening to the “Strange Bible” podcast. I hope these are helpful for you, and if they are, you can help us by sharing the word. Tell some friends about it, whatever—share. You can, as always, leave a review on iTunes, which helps spread the word also. And there you go. The next episode’s going to explore the last third part of this series on solitude and community as a life habit. So we’ll see you next time. Thanks.

[EMSB Theme Outro fades out]