

# Coach House Church **BEACONS**

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## **E N F O R C E D F A S T I N G**

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**16TH APRIL 2020**

When I first started preparing these talks, about 3 weeks ago, I asked the Lord what I should speak about. The answer came quite quickly - 3 related topics, Enforced Sabbath, Enforced Imprisonment and Enforced Fasting. So, here's the last one.

To be honest, with Easter behind us, I began to feel that Enforced Fasting was a strange topic. Depending on your church tradition, some of you may be in the habit of giving something up for Lent - but all thoughts of Lent are cancelled out on Easter Sunday when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

So perhaps the real question is – what can we not live without? What is really in our hearts? What is the love of our life, what do we crave? And why – why do we need it? We like to think we are rational people. If we are believers, we say that Jesus is Lord of our life, and we love him far above all else, and trust Him completely. But God has a habit of, ever so gently, uncovering what's really in our hearts.

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### **Jesus is Lord of our life, and we love him**

In the first week of lockdown, people were panic buying. And what were we buying? Toilet rolls. I'm still not sure why this was where the national anxiety was focussed – but there it is. And of course pasta, corned beef (which most people probably haven't bought in many a long year), and who knows what else.

People were reporting back "there's nothing in the shops you know". Of course, there was plenty of food – it's just that we are so used to being in control, having what we

want, when we want it, that it was all very strange to us. And underlying it all, there was fear – what if the food runs out?

It made me think about the Israelites coming out of Egypt. They had escaped, miraculously from abject slavery. Their captors were extremely reluctant to let them go - to lose their free labour and the input they made to the Egyptian economy. Well, you know the story (if you don't, look at the book of Exodus in the Bible – it tells you all the ups and downs of this captive people and their journey to freedom). One night, God gave very specific instructions. A lamb was to be slaughtered, and the blood painted on the door posts and lintels of the Israelite's homes. Death would visit every household that wasn't covered by the blood of the lamb. (This was an amazing precursor of what Jesus would do, many many years later – Jesus, the Lamb of God, who shed his blood by dying for us, so that we too might journey from captivity to sin and death, and find true life! That's the gospel)

Anyway, back to the Israelites and their miraculous release from slavery. While the cries of anguish rise up from the Egyptian homes, the Israelites pass out from slavery and are led to the Red Sea. The waters part, and they pass through on dry land.

Can you imagine it! The amazing grace of God. Amazing deliverance. Surely they will never ever forget the wonders that God did on that night – they saw it with their own eyes! The water parting before them! Their enemies destroyed! Surely they will always know that God is with them, and is powerfully capable of providing for them regardless of the circumstances.

Well, no. In spite of seeing God move in such amazing power, within days the people are grumbling and complaining and full of fear. In Exodus 16 v 3 they say

**“if only we had died by the Lords hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat, and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!”**

They go from glory and gratitude, to complaining and terror in a remarkably short period of time. Why?

As they are finally about to enter the promised land (an 11 day journey that took 40 years to complete), Moses gives a wonderful insight into the ways of God. He says

**“remember that these 40 years the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness, so that He might humble you and test you in order to know what was in your hearts. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during those 40 years. Know that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.” (Deuteronomy 8 v 2)**

It says, God led them all the way in the wilderness, in order to know what was in their hearts. Sometimes, God temporarily removes the things we value, that are familiar, and that we rely on – so that we begin to see what’s really in our hearts. For the Israelites it was food they craved – but it wasn’t only greed. There was that underlying fear that God didn’t really love them, that he had led them out of Egypt only to kill them in the desert. It took 40 years of wandering – and more besides – to plant in their hearts the truth that God did love them, and would always provide for them – regardless of the circumstances.

When God shows us what’s really in our hearts it’s to give us the chance to be free from it. Like the Israelites, what is revealed is not only greed– but fear. What if God doesn’t really love us? What if he’s not really in control? What if he IS in control – but still does things that I don’t like and think I cant cope with? And if all the things I’ve tried to control in life suddenly CAN’T be controlled – well, that’s scary.

God tests us as his beloved children, for our good. We only really learn to trust God when circumstances put that trust to the test. When life is good, our trust is, in a sense, a theoretical trust. It’s an abstract concept. But when we face hard times, and have no choice but to learn to rely on God, He proves faithful –and then it’s a real trust. It’s a living trust. It’s a solid foundation that you would stake your life on.

As the Apostle Peter records in 1 Peter 1 verse 7, trials come

**“so that your faith, of greater worth than gold....may be proved genuine’**

So - Enforced Fasting. Not just food. Anything. The big question is – what can YOU not live without? And why? You might be surprised. I never thought I was particularly attached to my Broadband connection, until for 3 weeks last year, when I was already stressed and lonely and anxious – my broadband was cut off due to an error by the supplier. After a week of fruitless phone calls, I was shocked how quickly I turned from a calm and reasonable person into a demented lunatic shouting down the phone at various confused call centre people. How shameful! With hindsight, I can see that the distraction of feeling I was in contact with people through emails, You Tube, music and so forth was keeping my anxiety and distress at bay, and giving me an illusion of control. Without it, there was no place to bury my fears. I had to lean in, even more, to God. But once God showed me my heart – my broadband problem was surprisingly quickly resolved.

So – as you struggle with things being out of your control, or your usual comforts being out of reach – what is really in your heart? In the enforced fast of not being able to do what you like, what is most uncomfortable? What is the underlying fear?

What if your favourite food is unavailable – chocolate is rationed, curry or pizza is a no go area? What if you ran out of things to read, your TV imploded and your phone irretrievably died? What if your internet was turned off? I don't know what your particular flash point may be, (maybe it really IS to do with toilet rolls) but you may never know until God puts it to the test – and shows you what is in your heart.

Don't be too dismayed if you have a melt down, and turn out to be not quite as spiritual as you thought! Let's be glad that God regards us as his children – he may expose our hearts, but only to comfort and teach us. He will restore us – all will be well.



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