

SESSION 4

Maintaining Focus on God



QUESTION 1:

How do you tune out distractions when you really need to focus?

THE POINT

Fasting and confession keep us rightly focused on Christ.

THE PASSAGES

Daniel 9:1-7,17-19

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Productivity expert Merlin Mann coined the phrase “inbox zero” to describe the concept of retaking control of your life from your computer. Mann’s theory is that if you can clear out your email inbox and keep it empty, you will experience higher productivity, a sense of stability, and lower stress levels. An overflowing inbox does more than curb productivity; it can cast a “sink full of dirty dishes” fog over your life.

Achieving “inbox zero” does not mean you will have to constantly check your email; actually, the opposite is true. Proponents recommend disabling notifications and having your email app closed for most of the day to focus your attention on your day’s priorities. You have achieved a zero status when you reclaim your attention and retake control of your life.¹

While it is not possible to achieve sinless perfection this side of heaven, it is possible to achieve “confession zero.” Sin buildup is far worse than any accumulation of emails, but through the spiritual disciplines of fasting and confession, we can maintain a strong relationship with God. With sin out of the way, our focus on Christ remains strong.

Daniel 9:1-4

- 1** In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans;
- 2** In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.
- 3** And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:
- 4** And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;

KEY WORDS: **The desolations of Jerusalem** (v. 2)—Refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the time after in which the city lay in ruins.

The community of Old Testament believers observed days of fasting as a part of their religion to help them keep their minds focused on God (Jer. 36:6,9). They also fasted when individuals faced difficult circumstances. For instance, King David fasted when he mourned over the deaths of Saul and his son Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:11-12). David also fasted when his newborn son became gravely ill (12:15-16).

Fasting is more than just abstaining from food. Simply abstaining from food is not necessarily a positive spiritual activity. For example, Jonathan fasted out of anger against his father (1 Sam. 20:34), and Ahab fasted and sulked as part of a pity party (1 Kings 21:4). However, most of the time the Old Testament writers cast fasting in a favorable light as a way to keep believers focused on greater things than their immediate physical needs.

Daniel fasted and prayed because of extreme circumstances. As he prayed and fasted, Daniel wore sackcloth, a rough material similar to burlap, and sat in ashes, as was customary during that time. For Daniel, this was not a routine observance of his faith. He was deeply burdened.

QUESTION 2:

What are some good reasons for fasting?

Daniel was no longer the teenage boy who had been brought to Babylon as a captive during Nebuchadnezzar's reign (Dan. 1). King Nebuchadnezzar and King Belshazzar had died, and now Darius was king in Babylon ("the realm of the Chaldeans"). Likely Daniel was around 80 years old, which is significant. Daniel had faithfully studied the Word, so he knew Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel's exile and captivity would last around seventy years (Jer. 29:10). Daniel's biblical literacy contributed to his time of prayer and fasting. Daniel also knew God is faithful to keep His word and covenant (Deut. 7:9; 1 Kings 8:56).

Since the exile would soon be over, Daniel turned to God in prayer. Instead of celebrating the inevitability of freedom, however, Daniel put on sackcloth, sat in ashes, abstained from eating, and prayed. His burden for Jerusalem shifted his focus away from food and comfort to what was really important. Daniel was deeply burdened, but that does not mean he was depressed or pessimistic. Nor did his concern grow out of some stress-induced anxiety. It had grown out of spending time in God's Word.

Daniel still was able to see the glory and the grandeur of God. His prayer began with praise and adoration of "the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments" and who loves and cares for his people. God had made a covenant with Abraham that included a specific piece of land (Gen. 12:1-3), and His exiled people soon would return to that land.

Fasting was still practiced during the time of Jesus. For example, Anna prayed and fasted in the temple (Luke 2:36-37). Jesus taught about the proper practice of fasting and prayer (Matt. 6:5-18). Members of the church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending Barnabas and Paul out on mission (Acts 13:2-3).

Fasting does not appear to be as common today as it was in biblical times. However, the spiritual discipline of fasting is still appropriate as a special observation. And when believers fast, it should be done in a biblical and responsible manner:

- ▶ The purpose of fasting is to focus on Jesus, not impress others.
- ▶ People with medical conditions should consult their physicians before fasting from food and ease into the practice gradually.
- ▶ If unable to fast from food, believers should practice other spiritual disciplines that will help them stay focused on Jesus. For example, Paul noted that married couples can abstain from sexual intimacy (1 Cor. 7:5). A person can engage in a fast from media or other activities.

ENGAGE

Using the acrostic below, describe something you could do with each item to help maintain a focus on Jesus.

Food

Activities

Spending money

Time

Instead of eating a meal or snack this week, spend that time in focused prayer as you commune with Christ.

Daniel 9:5-7

5 We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

6 Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

7 O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee.

When Solomon dedicated the temple, he prayed and asked God to forgive the sins of His people, even if those sins resulted in exile and captivity (2 Chron. 6:36-39). God heard and answered Solomon's prayer, declaring, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (7:14).

Now, over 400 years later, Daniel and his fellow Jews were experiencing the very exile and captivity described in Solomon's prayer. Perhaps thinking of God's promise in 2 Chronicles 7 and knowing God would hear him, Daniel prayed a prayer confessing both his personal sin and the sins of all Israel. The burden of his sin and the sins of God's people drove him to confess to the Lord.

When Jason Wright saw his friend's mug shot in the newspaper along with two others who were arrested in a drug bust, he did not respond in a judgmental way or gossip like others in his community; instead, his thoughts turned to his own sinfulness. In Wright's opinion, his friend was a genuine person, a hard worker, and fun to be with. While he was not excusing what his friend did, Wright said, "Every day I ask God not to give up on me yet. I made

mistakes. I'm imperfect. ... May we remember that *all* of us are sinners, even without our pictures in the paper.”²

Daniel didn't question God's love for them; in fact, he did the opposite. He affirmed the special love God had for His people (Dan. 9:4). Daniel also did not question why they were in captivity. He confessed the sins of the Jewish community, even while they were in exile. He included himself in his confession of corporate sins. He was thorough in his confession, speaking of sin in six ways:

1. **Sinned.** The root word means to miss a mark. An archer who misses the bull's eye has missed the mark. A golfer who fails to reach the green has missed the mark. An errant free throw that bounces off the rim misses the mark. Missing the mark implies an effort that is not quite good enough—it may come close, but if it does not hit the mark completely it is sin.
2. **Committed iniquity.** Committing iniquity is more than just missing the mark; it is missing the mark intentionally by distorting the truth.
3. **Done wickedly.** With growing intensity, he confessed that they had been wicked. The Hebrew word carries sin even further. They missed the mark set by God, they did so intentionally, and they will continue to sin. The Hebrew word drips with guilt.
4. **Rebelled.** Through their sin the people had risen in revolt against God.
5. **Departing.** The people had departed from God's revealed will. They had turned their backs on God's ways.
6. **Neither have we hearkened.** The people could not excuse their failure as ignorance of God's word to them. Daniel humbly admitted they had refused to even listen to the prophets God had sent.

No excuses. No mitigating circumstances. God's people were absolutely, unequivocally wrong. As Daniel confessed their sins, he also declared God's righteousness. Daniel was able to bear his soul and confess with outright transparency because he knew what God would do when he confessed his sin and the sins of the people, and when they turned from their wicked ways. As God had promised: "then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:12-14).

QUESTION 3:

Why is confession an important part of our spiritual lives?

Daniel 9:17-19

17 Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake.

18 O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.

19 O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.

As Daniel concluded his prayer, he included a phrase from a blessing given in the law: "the LORD make his face shine upon thee" (Num. 6:24-26). However, instead of asking for God's face to shine on his people, Daniel prayed that God would "cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake."

Daniel's petition was not based on the worthiness of God's people, but on God's great compassion. He wanted God's name to be lifted up by raising Jerusalem again. That is not to say that he prayed just for buildings and walls to be rebuilt. Yes, Jerusalem

bears God's name, the temple was built for His glory, and rebuilding the city and temple would glorify God, but the people also bore his name. Daniel pleaded with God to hear, to forgive, to listen, and to act, for the Lord's sake.

Daniel's attention was not on getting something from God; his focus was on God himself. Burdened with a heavy heart, Daniel shifted his focus from food and comfort. We've already seen that his prayer included confessing his sins and the sins of the people without making excuses or asking for allowances. Now with his attention focused exclusively on God, he prayed for God's name to be lifted up as He restored His people from captivity.

In 2011, an elderly man walked into a Seattle department store with an envelope and a note containing a \$100.00 bill. The note read, "During the late [forties] I stole some money from the cash register in the amount of \$20-\$30. I want to pay you back this money in the amount of \$100 to put in your theft account." The store manager said he thought the man's conscience "has been bothering him for the past 60 years."³

Confession and repentance are always the right things to do; these humbling actions make it possible to restore our relationships. However, if we don't confess our sins, we can't see clearly; our minds remain on our sin. But when we confess our sins, God forgives, the fog lifts, and we are able to focus on God.

QUESTION 4:

What obstacles might hinder us from praying, confessing, and fasting in our lives?

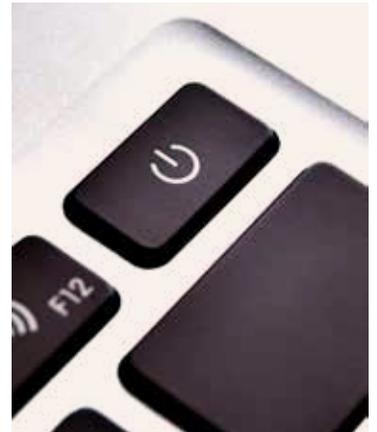
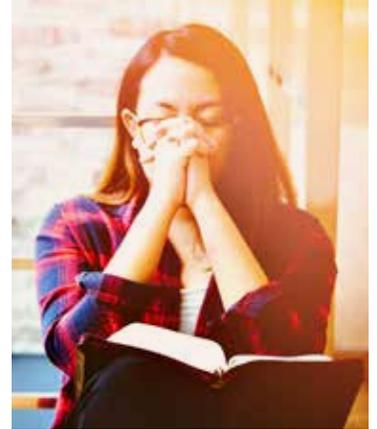
QUESTION 5:

What are the benefits of praying, confessing, and fasting as a community?

LIVE IT OUT

“Confession Zero” is our goal. We should diligently search our hearts for hidden sin, confess it to the Lord, receive forgiveness, and experience the stability and peace that comes from fellowship with God. What will you do this week to keep your focus on Christ?

- ▶ **Confess.** Spend time confessing any sin you have not previously brought to God. Confession is “agreeing with God” that your actions were sinful. Don’t make excuses. Confess—and thank Him for His forgiveness.
- ▶ **Fast from technology.** Choose something you do daily, such as watching television or connecting on social media, and commit to a fast from that activity for the next week. Use that time for uninterrupted prayer and focus on Christ.
- ▶ **Fast from food.** If your health allows, spend next weekend in an extended fast. Join others who are doing this Bible study in praying for a spiritual awakening in our nation.



END NOTES

1. Aytekin Tank, “Improve Your Productivity With Inbox Zero,” *Entrepreneur*, April 12, 2017, www.entrepreneur.com/article/290175
2. Jason F. Wright, “Do your sins have mug shots?” *Foxnews*, April 17, 2015, foxnews.com/opinion/do-your-sins-have-mug-shots.
3. “Elderly man repays Sears for cash he stole in 1940s,” *CBS News*, November 29, 2011, www.cbsnews.com/news/elderly-man-repays-sears-for-cash-he-stole-in-1940s.