

Joyfully Fasting!

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[0 : 00] Excellent. Good to see everybody. It was a very appropriate song to begin the sermon with because if you know your words, you'll know that fasting has to do with going without food and the song before was all about being hungry. The two things seem to be kind of almost contradictory, don't they, at this moment, but in a way both express the same thing, that the decision to go without food as a decision of devotion to God is a reflection of the hunger that a person feels for God that can't be satisfied with ordinary food. And just keep that in mind as we work through this sermon this morning on joyfully fasting. See, if I said to you, everybody's going to fast on Wednesday in time for the prayer meeting, a lot of you would think, oh, not Wednesday. Wednesday is my cooked breakfast morning, or it's my fish and chips supper evening, or it's my whatever it might be. If you're anything like me, you love food. I love food.

You know, I'm fond of telling people there are only two things I don't like when it comes to food that I've discovered. One is macaroni cheese, which has to do with a psychological rather than a real dislike. Just goes back to school dinners. I like cheese and I like pasta, so don't tell me why I don't like macaroni cheese. And I don't like hazelnut yogurts. And that goes back to when I used to do milk rounds, and it was the only yogurt left that I got given by the milkman.

And I felt ill the rest of the day, so that was hazelnut yogurts. And apart from that, I'll eat anything. Yeah. You could stick me on I'm a celebrity. I would have a go at anything they put in front of me. I like food. Food is a good gift of God. There's nothing wrong with it. He created very good food for us to enjoy. Going without food is not easy. You ever try dieting? Yeah, it's tough.

Especially after a few days when you get stuck and the bacon sandwich begins to smell. So lovely. If it wasn't for bacon, I could be a vegetarian.

So I don't want you to get the impression that there's anything wrong with food. And fasting, of course, is also a kind of trendy thing to do. It's a thing people do a lot of.

[2 : 47] Michael Morsley, who died recently, the GP, was famous for his fasting diet, and it has become very popular. Just because science has caught up, really, with what the Bible teaches, that fasting is actually very good for you, psychologically and physiologically and in terms of self-discipline and all other things.

It's actually very good for your body. So it has its benefits as well. But joyfully fasting, not necessarily words you would put together.

Before we get into what Jesus teaches about this, we're going to read what he says about it in Matthew 6, verses 16 through 18. When you fast, notice, when you fast, not if you fast.

He expects that you will, though he never commands you to do it. Important distinction. There's no commandment to fast. But he assumes you will.

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do. For they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

[4 : 00] But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting. But only to your Father who is unseen, and your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Amen. And the Lord will bless to us the reading of his word. So as a church, it is our desire to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did.

And the practices that we've been looking at in regard to how to live a disciplined Christian life are all practices that Jesus himself followed.

So we've looked at witness and Sabbath and generosity and prayer, community, reading scripture, solitude, and now fasting. These are all things that Jesus did, which is why we're emphasizing them.

We're not at all interested in just getting people to follow religious exercises. People have done that for millennia. It isn't the exercises or disciplines themselves that make very much difference to a person.

[5 : 08] In the end, it's what's in your heart. You can pray, but your prayers can be for reasons other than a desire to know God and to honor God and to please God.

You can fast, and your fasting can be for desires other than knowing God, loving God, and pleasing God, etc. You can do it all for yourself. You can do it all for reasons that are less than God intends them to be.

Our desire in Whitby Christian Fellowship is to be like Jesus, to learn what are called the unforced rhythms of grace, because we want to learn what it is to live every day in the presence of God and to do those things that give us the best opportunity to spend our day in the presence of God.

Jesus was always the beloved son of the Father. When Jesus was baptized, there was a voice from heaven that said, this is my well-beloved son in whom I am well-pleased.

He didn't please his father by doing these things. Yeah? He did these things in order to spend time with his father. That's different. We can't please God by doing these things.

[6 : 20] We can't think, oh, I can tick the box off. What is my to-do list? On Wednesday, I'll fast. On Thursday, I'll pray. On Friday, I'll spend the time in solitude, etc.

If you kind of do that kind of thing, well, that's not where it's at. It's not about doing the action. It's about doing the action in order to be with the Heavenly Father, just as Jesus himself did.

And that's why, incidentally, the Bible warns us against the dangers of getting caught up with the practices. So the Apostle Paul says, in 1 Timothy 4, 1-3, beware, he says, of those who forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

You see, it's so very easy to get these things mixed up. If my fasting gives me an opportunity to please God and I fast to avoid food on a certain day, I could easily fall in trouble thinking, well, there's something wrong with food.

There's nothing wrong with food. God created them to be enjoyed. If I spend time alone with God, free from the distractions of my wife and family, perhaps it's better for me to be single.

[7 : 38] No, nothing wrong with your wife and family. Actually, there's probably far more wrong with you. But we'll not talk about that. There's nothing wrong with people. You see, what religion does sometimes is it says, oh, well, it's sinful to get married.

Or if it's not sinful, at least it's not God's best. And there have been practices of celibacy that have no warrant in Scripture. Or we should only eat fish on a Friday.

Well, there's no warrant for that in Scripture. But that's what religion can so easily do. This is not about religious ritual. This is about lifestyle.

Seeking to make sure that everything that is good, that is given to us by God, everything is kept in its proper place. As Paul put it in Corinthians, all things are lawful for me, but not everything is beneficial.

Yeah? So yeah, I can eat what I like, but it doesn't mean that I should just eat everything that's in the house. Because clearly that's not going to be beneficial for my weight, or for my health, or anything else.

[8 : 50] I exercise moderation in those things in order that I might be as healthy as possible while enjoying the good gifts of God. You get the point.

So that's the important thing for us to grasp. There's nothing wrong with food. And that's not why we fast. Next slide, please. A very interesting illustration from Richard Foster helps set us up in his celebration of discipline.

He talks about, a farmer is helpless to grow grain. All he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground. He plants the seed.

He waters and plants. And then the natural forces of the earth take over, and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the spiritual disciplines. They are ways of sowing to the spirit.

By themselves, the spiritual disciplines can do nothing. They can only get us to the place where something can be done. Okay? A very good quote, and you see the point of that.

[9 : 53] Just remember that. That's really important as we go through this series. So what is fasting? Well, it's a discipline where we are encouraged to go without food for a certain length of time.

And sometimes people go without water. Sometimes they go without tea, and so on. But to go without food generally for a certain time in order to spend time with God. And Jesus did this, as did the Jews. It was their common practice. Luke 18, 12 says that they fasted the Pharisees twice a week. And indeed, when the Christian church began to take root in the Roman Empire, they did it twice a week as well. Almost to copy them. Foolishly, I think. But they said, well, the Jews, they fasted on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so we fasted Wednesdays and Fridays to kind of set themselves apart. Even by then, and that was only about 50 or 60 years, that was written about 50, 60 years after the New Testament, even then, they began to go wrong. They're telling the world, well, we fast, just like the Jews, but on different days.

[11:02] And it kind of seems to go against what Jesus is saying here about everything being private and kept low-key, and they're kind of publicly proclaiming it, which is not really what Jesus intended.

So easily, they went wrong. But Jesus did fast. He fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. At the end of that fast, he was assaulted by the devil, and he also taught about fasting, as we shall see. But the question is, why? Well, the why is because we hunger for God. As the psalmist puts it in Psalm 63, O God, you are my God, early and earnestly will I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh longs for you in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water, to see your power and your glory. So as I have seen you in the sanctuary, you have been my help. Therefore, in the shadow of your wings will I rejoice. My soul follows hard after you. Your right hand upholds me. So there is a hunger, but the hunger is for God.

[12:13] Yeah? So yes, we like food. We like our comforts. We like the things that God has provided. But the warning here is that they should never be more important to you than God is.

And to show God that they're not as important as He is, occasionally I will fast. to demonstrate that. It's not the only reason to fast, but it is the primary reason to demonstrate a hunger for God, to show God that the thing we most long for is Himself.

You remember when Jesus went to Samaria to meet the woman at the well? and when He met her and He sent His disciples off and they went off to find food.

And when they came back, they said, we've got food, time for supper. And He said, I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food, said Jesus, is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work.

notice what He's saying there. There is something that satisfies my need, something that satisfies my longing and hunger that is far more important than food.

[13:26] It is to do the work of God who sent me and to finish that work. That's my desire, my greatest desire. This is the thing I can't do without. This is the thing that I hunger for and it's the thing that satisfies me.

Remember when we were talking about reading Scripture, we said that Jesus said, man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Scripture was His hunger. Scripture was His food. And that coupled with doing the will of God was the demonstration of that hunger. The food that satisfied Him more than any earthly food could.

And so there's a challenge always when we come to think about fasting. Why do I fast? What hunger does that reveal? Does it reveal a true hunger after God?

Let's look at the next slide, please. Jesus said when people were asking Him about life, He said, life is more than food and the body more than clothes.

[14:34] He was talking to people who were worried, understandably worried, about everyday things. like how shall I ensure I've got enough money in the bank? How shall I ensure that I have enough security against difficult days that may lie ahead?

How shall I ensure that I will be as trouble-free as I can be in life? Oh well, lots of people say, I need to make sure I've got enough to eat and I've got enough to drink and I've got enough to provide for myself and my family and I've got enough security.

And if I have all of these things, I will have a happy life. Jesus says, life is more than food and the body more than clothes.

Consider the ravens, they do not sow or reap. They have no storeroom or barn, yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable are you than birds?

Jesus is saying in effect to us, look, the only way you can have real security in life and real happiness in life is by trusting God. Because all of the stuff you have can be taken from you very quickly.

[15:41] All of the stuff you have is temporary in nature. You can't guarantee it any more than you can guarantee your health. It can be there one day, it can be taken the next.

We all know that. Life is like that. So full of uncertainty. And therefore, you must learn to trust your life to God. You must learn to give your life to God.

You must make God your chief joy. You must make Him your dearest longing, your hunger, the hunger of your soul. And fasting allows us to do that.

Paul warns in Philippians 3.19 about those whose God is their stomach. And he warns against those who serve God in order to satisfy their own appetites.

That could be a modern description, couldn't it? People think, oh, well, I must have more food. I must have more drink. I must have more excitement in my life. I must go on more holidays.

[16:44] I must have more money in the bank. I must have a great big house. And I have all these things. Life will be wonderful. No, no, no. Those things never ultimately satisfy.

And if we make them gods and we chase after them and we have them sitting on our drive in terms of the best possible car we could have and we polish it every day instead of going to a place of worship, the driveway becomes our place of worship as we polish our little idol.

And if we kind of spend all our time looking at our bank balances and wondering if our next investment's going to come through, we are sadly, sadly idolatrous. Life is not meant to be lived in the abundance of the things we possess.

It is meant to be lived in recognition that the God who give them is faithful and will take care of us and we don't need to worry. We need to give Him our lives.

Put God in the right place. So, three things to note. First of all, Jesus teaches us how to fast anticipating that we will want to.

[17:57] So, in Matthew 6, He says, when you fast, not if, when you fast, there are various things you need to bear in mind, various things you need to do. First of all, He says, do not look somber.

Don't kind of think, look at me, I'm fasting. Goodness, it's hard to fast, man. Missed breakfast this morning, man.

But I'm doing it, please God, you know. No, no, Jesus says, don't look somber. Smile. Joyfully fast. Don't make a big play about it.

Don't let people know you're doing it. He says, don't do it for sure. Don't do it to be a hypocrite. The Greek word hypocritus means don't do it to put on a mask because the actors in the Greek plays, they put on masks.

That's literally did it to hide their identity so you got caught up in the character and they not only acted but they articulated their act. They did it in a kind of Shakespearean way to tell you the story.

[19:02] They played, they provided their own narration so you could be absolutely clear about what they were doing. Jesus says, don't be like hypocrites. Don't tell everybody what you're doing so that you get brownie points.

Oh, what a wonderfully religious person that person is. Oh, I wish I was like them. Okay, Jesus says, if that's your motivation, you've got your reward. People think well of you.

Well done. But don't expect God to pat you on the back because you're proud of yourself and pride goes before a fall.

So don't do it, he says. And then he says, do not be obvious about it. Don't put sackcloth and ashes on and dress in a certain way. Oh, he's obviously fasting.

Look at him. He's not said anything, but he's dressed to show you what he's doing. Don't do that, he says, to draw attention to yourself. Instead, he says, do it privately. Let it be known only to God what you're doing.

[19:59] And then if you let God know what you're doing, God, who sees what you do in secret, will reward you openly. And of course, when you're praying, sorry, when you're fasting, you're going to be praying.

And there's something very important about connecting those two things. When the disciples were sent out by Jesus to cast out demons and to heal the sick and so on, they came across a demon-possessed child and they tried to drive out that demon.

And it didn't work. And they couldn't understand why. And Jesus responded to them and said, this kind can only come out through prayer and fasting. He linked those two things together.

He indicates by that that there is some kind of spiritual dynamic going on here, some kind of spiritual force that is not easily broken and requires believers to spend a considerable amount of time in the discipline of their body, in the discipline of the soul through prayer and fasting that this demon may be driven out.

some kind of connection perhaps with spiritual warfare, but some prolonged period of struggle with the forces of evil that is manifested for the believer in prayer and in fasting.

[21 : 25] And so the church has always taught that at times of difficulty, either in the national life of a country or in the personal lives of individuals, sometimes they have encouraged people to spend a considerable amount of time in prayer and fasting.

Nationally, we did this as a country during the Second World War when we were imminently facing the invasion of the Nazis during that war and the king called the nation to a time of national prayer and repentance with fasting.

It has been done in history and well done in history as well. when the church is taken seriously that we're not just up against natural forces but spiritual forces in our life that we need to bring disciplined prayer to.

And if you think about it, if you try to break any habit in your life, any bad habit in your life, it's hard. It requires effort.

You know, if you're going to be an Olympic runner, you can't spend every Friday night having pepperoni pizza and Coca-Cola, can you? Or fish and chips and a pint of beer. You can't keep doing that week on a week and expect to win a gold medal.

[22 : 42] It takes discipline. If anything gets control of you and it's out of control, any desire or lust or any addiction gets control, how do you break it?

Well, you're not going to break it by indulging in it. You've got to refuse it. Then you've got to refuse the desire behind it. And you've got to fight against that and wrestle against that.

The Apostle Paul talks about this. He says, when you think about a runner, he says, he doesn't run aimlessly. You think about a boxer, he says, he doesn't punch the air aimlessly.

What he does is, he makes his body his slave. He brings it under discipline. He brings it under control in order to control the sinful desires of the flesh.

And a Christian is called to do that. To bring his body under control so that nothing dominates, nothing takes control.

[23 : 42] Paul says, food for the stomach, stomach for food, but I will not be mastered by anything. I will bring it under control. Do you remember that old saying Grandma used to teach you?

Moderation in all things. Good saying. We live in a very immoderate society where just get your fill seems to be the watchword, but it's very harmful to the soul.

Spiritual disciplines allow us to bring our body under control in order that God may rule there and not stuff. And not things.

And not those things that are not helpful to our growth in Jesus. And the church fasted. In Acts 13, when the apostle Paul was considering where he should go and where the gospel should spread out to, the church of Antioch there, in Antioch rather, had prophets and teachers, we're told, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Menaen, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul, while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Another benefit for fasting. When you're seeking God's will, when you want to know what God wants you to do and what direction you could go in, you've been praying about it, but you haven't got any light yet, why not take some time to fast?

[25 : 22] Because what happens when you fast, at least in the experience that I've heard about and my own experience, what happens when you fast is that the mind becomes quite alert.

The first thing it tends to do is tell you you're hungry. But what's going to happen after you've had your Sunday dinner today? Let's say you have Yorkshire puddings and beef and all the trimmings. What's going to happen? You're going to feel tired. Yeah? You're going to feel, ugh, just going to have a nap. If you don't have Yorkshire beef and pudding and you don't have anything at all, I can guarantee you you won't feel tired.

You'll think, well, I'm hungry. I've got to have some food. Yeah? The mind is alert because it needs its nutrition. When you fast and you're praying, your mind is alert to God and God can speak to you and God can give you that direction that you need and say, this is what I want you to do.

This is the place I want you to go to. This is where I want you to be. And you begin to hear God's voice because it puts you in that place where you're hungry enough to listen.

[26 : 37] And so Jesus tells us it's a good thing. And when you do it, make sure you do it for the right reasons. But when you do it, be prepared to hear what God has got to say.

The next thing we learn. Next slide, please. Fasting can reveal our commitment to sacrificial service. why do we discipline our body?

Why do we do it? Why do we bring it under control? Because we want to be the best we can be. When I was a young boxer, I used to run pretty much every night.

Three miles a night minimum. I'd run and run and run and run. Yeah? And then I'd go to the gym three times a week. And we used to do a stupid thing. We'd stand in front of the mirror and look at ourselves and punch the invisible other person.

It's kind of like, why did you do it? Well, you did it because you wanted to be good. It didn't help me very much, but you wanted to be good. You wanted to be the best you could be.

[27 : 39] You know, I had a dream of being the first world champion from South Shields. It was never going to happen. I met one once, Muhammad Ali, but I didn't, because he came to South Shields, but I never became one myself.

No chance. Yeah. Put your body under discipline. Runners do it. Footballers do it. Yeah? People dedicated their craft.

They do it. And they do it to show their commitment to their craft. And they show that they're willing to sacrifice in order to be the best that they could be.

And Paul says, if you do that, if an Olympian does that to get a prize that is a piece of laurel on their head that is going to kind of degrade and die very quickly, why won't you do that in order to please God and to receive a reward that is going to last forever, that can never be taken from you?

Why wouldn't that be your greatest commitment? Why wouldn't you sacrifice for that? What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and yet lose his soul, Jesus says?

[28 : 45] What can a man give in exchange for his soul? But people go to extraordinary lengths and give extraordinary sacrifices to get something that won't last forever.

So why wouldn't we as Christians do it for something that will never, ever be taken from us? Sacrifice and commitment is an inevitable part of the Christian life.

If we're Christians, Jesus says, you have to take up your cross and follow me. You've got to lay down other ambitions to put me first. And fasting is a way of demonstrating that commitment.

Cornelius Plantinga said, self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin.

The early desert fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked. Full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God.

[29 : 54] And now I want you to be honest with yourself. Is your appetite for God the best it can be when everything's running well for you?

When the job's going well and you've got all you want and you can sit up and take life easy and not worry and not be stressed and everything else. Is that when you're most hungry for God? It's not, is it?

You're most hungry for God when you're most desperate. When things are going wrong, when your health is in danger, when you're not sure you're going to have enough to pay the bills, when you're completely controlled by a lust or a desire and you want desperately to break free, that is when you're most hungry for God.

And what does Jesus say to that? Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. When you're really hungry and when you really desire God, that's when you're in that place to be satisfied.

But when stuff is replacing God, then you become spiritually lazy. Am I right? Fasting reveals our commitment and our sacrificial service.

[31 : 07] Next slide and the last point. Oh, sorry. Good verse here. Romans 12, 1-2.

Get this in your head. Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is. His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

That's why you need the Scriptures. That's why you need God's Word.

That's why you need God's thoughts. That's why you need to take them on board. Because as you take them into your mind, it changes the way you begin to think. It changes the things you want most for your life.

[32 : 06] and you begin to align yourself with what God wants for your life. What is best for you because He made you and He knows what is best for you.

What will lead to the happiest kind of living. And He says, take it on board and let it influence the way you think. And as you do so, your life will be transformed.

You know, you kind of get in touch with these people who are, you know, like my oldest son is, you know, a kind of consultant trainer for people who want to make their bodies the best they can be.

He gives them exercises, He gives them diet plans, He gives them prompts every so often on Instagram, and He gives them advice, and, you know, he's looking fit, they're looking fit, and everything else, yeah?

What He tells you them and what they discover is that's an everyday thing. You can have the occasional indulgence, but if you have six days of indulgence and one day of training, it's not going to go well for you.

[33 : 09] You have six days of training and one day of indulgence, your body will be in optimum shape. Indulgence is nice sometimes, but not all the time. If you allow God to renew your mind and you allow that to become a disciplined everyday way of living, I challenge you to see how wonderful such a life can be.

I challenge you to see how you can discover life as God intends it to be lived, where you are happy, where your conscience is clear, where you're living a healthy and good and wholesome life, where you learn to love yourself as God loves you, learn to love others as God wants you to love others, where you learn to value things without them controlling you, where you learn to appreciate and live with gratitude without having to constantly strive to get more.

That's the life God intends you to live. Next slide, please. And finally, fasting reminds us that our bodies belong to God. Paul says, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Now, we kind of like that idea, don't we? Oh, my body is a temple. Some of our bodies are a bit more ruined than others, but nonetheless, the body is a temple. So Paul says, what are you going to do with that body?

Are you going to give it to sexual gratification? Are you going to give it to lust and evil desire? Are you going to harm it in any way?

[34 : 56] You mustn't do that because you're not your own. You were bought at a price. And even within that context, as we've seen, he talks about food. Are you going to overindulge?

You shouldn't do it. It's not your body. Your body is given to you to be looked after to or for by God. And you're to do it properly. So he says, don't unite with a prostitute.

He's very blunt about it. Because your body belongs to God, would you take Christ, would you take your Lord Jesus Christ into a brothel with you? Imagine what he would say today.

Would you take your body into some back room and inject it with deadly poison? Would you take your body and drink it into oblivion?

Would you take your body and harm it? Your body does not belong to you. It belongs to God. You need to learn to give it back to God who made it in order that you might live a life that is pleasing to him.

[36 : 13] What a challenge. What a challenge. Fasting reminds us that we belong to God. We were made for him to live for him, to glorify him.

And so, if we have to put the body to a bit of suffering, a bit of fasting, in order to bring it under control, to remind ourselves that it belongs to God, not a bad thing.

If we have to say no to sexual desire in order to please God, not a bad thing. If we need to say no to addiction, not a bad thing.

What we desperately need to be, however, is honest before God today. imagine that before us is an altar. And then take your body and put it on that altar.

I'm going to ask you now just to close your eyes. I'm going to ask you to imagine that before you there is an altar and then to see yourself.

[37 : 28] And then honestly to say to yourself before God, what is it, God, what is it, Lord, that controls me? It might be pornography.

It might be alcohol. It might be drugs. It might be illicit sexual desire. It might be anger.

It might be fear. It might be fear. It might be money. It might even be worry.

It might be fear. It might be doubt. It might be self. What is it that consumes and controls my everyday thinking?

And then I want you to take that thing, that one thing that the Holy Spirit has put his finger on you now and to lift it onto that altar and say, God, here is the thing that consumes and possesses me.

[38 : 56] I sacrifice it. to you. I give it to you. Take it away from me.

I no longer want it to control me. Break its power in my life. And now in your heart, I want you to promise God that you will begin to fast from that thing.

That you will refuse to give it its place back in your life. that by the grace of God you will not allow yourself to be consumed day in and day out by that thing.

Keep away from it. See it for what it is, an enemy of your soul. And instead, replace that thing with Jesus.

let him be your hunger. Let him be your thirst. Let him be your God.

[40 : 18] And I want you to imagine yourself being embraced in this moment by the Lord Jesus Christ.

He loves you. He longs for you to spend time with him. Let him become your bread.

Let him be your hunger. Let him be your thirst. In Jesus' name.

Amen.