

**Module** : Fasting**Session 1** : Panoramic Overview and Introduction to Fasting**Focus** : Presentation, People, Parameters, Patterns, Period and  
Physical Aspects of Fasting

## 1. PRESENTING “FASTING”

In our contemporary day, fasting is used for political reasons or to generate awareness of the plight of some person or people group, with the express objective of highlighting some cause or injustice. Generally this takes the form of so-called ‘hunger strikes’, which in effect is a protest or threat of self- destruction to bring pressure to bear upon those in authority or power, in order to attain the benefits or claims of the people involved<sup>1</sup>.

Biblical Fasting is not a hunger strike; it is not political in character but is solely spiritual in nature and objective. Its focus is not to manipulate higher powers into meeting certain demands. Far from asserting one’s rights in a spirit of pride, true fasting focuses on humbling oneself before God in utter and total reliance and dependence upon Him and also so that one can seek after Him more intently and focusedly. More on the reasons for fasting will follow later in this study.

Fasting is one of the most neglected spiritual disciplines of our time. In His ‘Sermon on the Mount’, Jesus gives primacy to three areas of spiritual practice, viz. giving, prayer and fasting (Matthew 6). Of these three areas, the discipline of fasting is probably the most neglected. Fasting, together with other spiritual disciplines, is key to spiritual growth and effectiveness as we execute God’s purposes globally. It may surprise many people just how much scope and weight the Scriptures accord to the subject of fasting.

## 2. PEOPLE WHO FASTED

I have endeavoured to give explanation and current truth application to most scriptural references on the subject, by extrapolating Biblical ‘**PRINCIPLES**’ for effective fasting and by examining various ‘**PERSONS**’ who fasted with tremendous results. Thus we will explore the value of fasting both **by ‘precept’** and **by ‘example’**.

One cannot escape the linkage between the ‘greatness of’ and ‘great exploits’ performed by many mighty men and women of God on the one hand, and their commitment to the practice of fasting on the other.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the ‘Illustrated Dictionary of Biblical Imagery’

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Examples of people in Scripture who fasted with significant outcomes are Israel as a nation, Moses, David, the men of Jabesh-Gilead, Elijah, Jehosaphat, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Hannah, Anna, John, the Antioch Church leadership, Paul, the Apostles and Cornelius. Jesus Christ, in His life as a man who demonstrated to us how a son of God should live successfully on the earth, is our supreme pattern, standard and model of practice and behaviour. He too observed the discipline of fasting. If He did it, so should we.

We shall explore the varied reasons that inspired these saints to fast either **PRIVATELY for personal reasons** or **PUBLICLY for issues concerning God's purpose**, as they led sometimes an entire nation in a fast to effect God's will on a macro-scale. The Scriptures make a strong case for personal fasting AS WELL AS corporate fasting. The potential effect of corporate fasting will obviously depend on the personal commitment of each individual in the group.

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### **3. PARAMETERS OF FASTING**

The Hebrew word for 'fast' = '**tsom**', which means, "**TO COVER THE MOUTH**".

The Greek word for fast, '**nesteia**' means '**A VOLUNTARY ABSTINENCE FROM FOOD**'

#### **3.1. FASTING IS THE PRACTICE OF DELIBERATELY ABSTAINING FROM FOOD FOR SPIRITUAL PURPOSES**

Biblical fasting does not simply constitute an abstinence from food per se, but this voluntary withholding of food is but a physical act of 'restraint' or 'self-denial', so that one could devote oneself more intensely to some spiritual pursuit, practice or Kingdom purpose. Refusal to eat food in the natural, in this context, has almost the opposite effect in the spiritual realm. The physical body is robbed of vital nourishment, while the spirit man is built up. People who experience prolonged starvation evidence this food deprivation outwardly by a lean, skeletal and malnourished body. He who fasts deliberately chooses not to eat, and thereby nourishes and builds up his 'spirit' posture.

During a fast, the focus is spirit and not flesh (body). Willfully abstaining from food withholds from the body physical food designed to build it up, but instead, in the realm of spirit, the effect experienced is a building up of one's inner spirit - to greater sharpness and vigilance. This is true for any son of God who deliberately fasts according to biblical prescription, but not necessarily so for those starving involuntarily. Starvation is not the same as fasting. Starvation is due to a severe scarcity or total lack of food, the consequence of which will be leanness and ultimately, if prolonged, possible death. The point of comparison is simply that the physical thinness associated with no intake of food in a deliberate fast, has a counterpart spiritually in that the spirit man is built and nourished. Hence, whilst fasting is a physical exercise in the natural, quintessentially, it is more spiritual than physical. So the one who fasts must not focus on the sometimes negative physical effects of a prolonged fast, like weakness, severe weight loss, muscle tone loss, etc., but on the positive formation taking place in his spirit and in the realm of 'spirit'.

Fasting purely involving an abstinence of food, without any commitment to engage God more deeply through prayer and the study of Scripture, is meaningless. It is not simply withholding food from your body as a cold and clinical exercise over a period of time. Fasting is God's chosen way to deepen and strengthen prayer. For Daniel, it also facilitated the opening up of his understanding of God's Word. You will be the poorer spiritually and your God-intended effectiveness and potency will never be fully realised until you begin practising the discipline of fasting. On a lighter note, we must not pray fast, but fast and pray. Fasting is a spiritual discipline for spiritual purposes. It is not natural; it is spiritually supernatural.

### **3.2. FASTING IS NOT THE SAME AS STARVATION OR DIETING**

The objective of Biblical fasting is always spiritual, i.e. to attain some spiritual end – for example, to heighten the spirit's dominance and leadership of the soul, to heighten or sharpen one's spiritual senses, fine-tune your spiritual hearing capacity, desire for greater penetrative prophetic sight, etc. There are physical benefits that one experiences as result of fasting (e.g. weight loss, purifying the body, detoxification, etc.), but these benefits do not motivate the fast. One's 'spiritual hunger' is so intense that you fast physically to impact the spirit realm, irrespective of the positive physical bodily results. People who fast usually have no great difficulty in overcoming any temptation to eat, but talk to a friend who tried to lose weight through dieting – it is war on every front!

### **3.3. PRIMARILY, FASTING IS ABSTINENCE FROM FOOD, NOT WATER**

If fasting is an abstinence from "food", what constitutes food? Food is defined as follows: nutriment, nourishment in solid form. Thus eating food and drinking water are two completely different things. The perception that true fasting excludes food AND water has prevented many believers from experiencing the spiritual rewards of an extended fast – which is impossible without drinking water.

#### **Scripturally, it is acceptable to drink water when fasting:**

- Paul knew the difference between 'fasting' and 'thirsting'.

**2 Cor. 11:27**      In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in **hunger and thirst**, in **fastings** often, in cold and nakedness. **(KJV)**

Note also the plural form – 'fastingS' – i.e. he regularly observed it.

- After His 40 day fast, Jesus was hungry, not thirsty.

**Matthew 4:2**      And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an **hungered**

Towards the end of his fast, satan tempted Jesus to eat, not to drink. We thus assume that He had been drinking water throughout the fast.

- After the 3 day fast of the 4000, they were offered food, not water.

**Mark 8:1-3**

In those days the multitude being very great, and having nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples unto him, and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat: And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far. **(KJV)**

- Elijah fasted 40 days, drinking water only.

**1 Kings 19:8**

So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

**Biologically, it is advisable to drink water when fasting.**

One can survive for a few weeks without food, but only a few days without water. One should drink plenty of water during any fast unless you are observing a 'TOTAL FAST' for three days maximum. Drinking sufficient water is critical especially on a lengthy fast. During a long fast, the body's internal organs involved in the digestive process get a chance to REST and also the body emits harmful toxins. Water helps with the detoxification process, assisting the body to efficiently eliminate harmful toxins. Spiritual fasting has the physical benefit of detoxification and assists the body to naturally replenish itself. There is much information available on the internet about the tremendous physical benefits of drinking water during an extended fast.

**3.4. FAST FROM FOOD AND WATER SHOULD NOT GO BEYOND THREE DAYS**

Although the root meaning of 'fast' indicates abstinence from food, not water, there are **three incidences** in the Bible where fasts were undertaken **without food and water**:

- **Moses** twice fasted for 40 days without food and water (Exodus 34:28-29; Deut. 9:9-18) – but it must be remembered that Moses was literally “**there with the Lord**” (verse 28), thus having no need for food or water.
- **Esther and the Jews.**

**Esther 4:16**

“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; **do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.** I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.

- **Paul (Saul) at his conversion.**

**Acts 9:9**

And he was three days without sight, and **neither ate nor drank.**

Except for Moses' 40 day fast of this kind, the longest recorded fast without food and water is **THREE DAYS**. Moses was able to undertake this 'absolute' fast twice for 40 days with virtually no break in between (really 80 days), because he was actually in the immediate presence of God. Thus one should not fast without food and water for more than **THREE DAYS (or 72 hours)**.

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#### 4. PATTERNS OF FASTING

In Scripture there seems to be varying methods or patterns of fasting. Some went without food only and drank water; others abstained from both food and water for up to three days; others refrained from eating only specific kinds of foods. For the purposes of understanding and easy identification of various fasting patterns, I have classified fasting into three distinct categories. These category labels are not found in the Bible, but they (or some variation of the label) have been used by Bible scholars and believers alike for many generations to describe the particular kind of fast undertaken:

Type of Fast	Definition	Scriptural Example
<b>Absolute Fast</b> <b>Dry Fast</b> <b>Extreme Fast</b>	No food or water is taken for not more than three days	Esther: Esther 4:16 Paul: Acts 9:9
<b>Normal Fast</b> <b>Wet Fast</b>	No food is taken, but one drinks water for as long as up to 40 days	Jesus: Luke 4 Elijah: 1 Kings 19:8 Paul: Acts 27:33
<b>Partial Fast</b>	One abstains from certain tasty foods and drinks	Daniel: Dan. 10:2,3

**Daniel 10:2-3** In those days, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed.

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## 5. PERIOD OF FASTING

Fasting should be practiced on a regular basis as part of your normal devotion. A fast of one day in a week is generally recommended. Paul says concerning his own fasting practice ‘... in fastings, **OFTEN**’ (2 Cor. 11:27). The seriousness and scope of need for which you fast will normally determine its length. Also, be led by the Spirit as to when to break the fast (see Jesus’ fast in Matthew 4: he was ‘led by the Spirit’).

### Duration of Fasts in Scripture:

• Part of a Day	:	King Darius	Dan. 6:18
• One Day	:	Israel	Lev 23:2; 1Sam.7:6,14:24; Jer.36:6; Neh.9:1
• Three Days	:	Paul	Matt. 15:32; Mark 8:2,3; Acts 9:9
		Esther and the Jews	Esther 4:16
• Four Days	:	Cornelius	Acts 10:30
• Seven Days	:	Men of Jabesh Gilead	1 Samuel 31:11-13
		David	2 Sam. 12:15-18, 21-23
• Fourteen Days	:	Paul and Crew	Acts 27:33
• Twenty-One Days:		Daniel	Dan. 10:2,3
• Forty Days	:	Moses	Ex.34:28 / Deut 9:9,18
		Elijah	1 Kings 19:8
		Jesus	Matt. 4 & Luke 4

**[Aside Note:** In Dan.1:12-16, Daniel took a decision not to defile himself with the King of Babylon’s food for TEN DAYS. He elected to only eat vegetables and drink water. This may not be regarded as a fast as it is not strictly a fast per se, but a spiritual decision of Daniel not to internalise the diet of the Babylonians. This was a physical decision indicating a greater spiritual principle of being in the system of Babylon, yet not being influenced nor conditioned by its philosophy or principles (as represented by its food). Many cite this incident and have labeled it as the popularly known, ‘Daniel Fast’ – but it is really not a fast in the truest sense. A more apt scriptural reference to a ‘Daniel Fast’ would be Dan.10:2,3, where he fasted for 21 days, eating no tasty foods, or meat, nor drinking any wine in order to humble himself and gain understanding of a message and vision from God - see Dan. 10:12-14.]

**Dan. 10:12-14** Then he said to me, “Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty- one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia. Now I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision pertains to the days yet future.

Those who have **never fasted before**, and **find difficulty** in starting this great spiritual discipline, should start perhaps by fasting partially:

**Here are my suggestions:**

**Example 1:** Omit breakfast on your chosen fast day; do this on your fast day for four weeks; for the next four weeks, omit breakfast and lunch; for the next four weeks, omit breakfast, lunch and supper.

**Example 2:** Omit certain tasty foods, meats, fruit juices, etc. Drink much water.

It must be remembered that fasting, although entailing a willful abstinence from food on a physical level, is really a spiritual exercise. Empowered by the Holy Spirit in your spirit, you can overcome any physical discomfort associated with fasting. The severity of the need you face, the intensity of your desire for spiritual things and progress, the serious priority you accord to the need to humble your soul, etc. will all fuel your ability to stay the length of any fasting period you feel led to embark on, or which your spiritual oversight imposes upon a corporate fast. Do not appraise the length of a fast in natural terms with a humanistic mindset, but approach it with spiritual perception and sight. Focus on what is being accomplished in the realm of spirit and this will help you overcome and disregard the fleshly physical difficulty.

Eating plenty of fruit and drinking much water a few days before a planned extended fast will greatly assist in removing the negative physical effects of dizziness, nausea and headaches that usually are experienced in the first two to three days of a lengthy total fast (a fast in which only water is taken without any food at all).

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## **6. PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF FASTING**

1. On prolonged fasts, have sufficient sleep.
2. Your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost. Take proper care of your body – keep it healthy – fasting aids in this. Wash regularly during longer fasts.
3. If you are on regular medication or if you suffer from diseases like diabetes or tuberculosis, it is wise to obtain medical advice before venturing into a fast that extends beyond a meal or two.
4. You may experience unpleasant symptoms such as dizziness, headaches or nausea in the early phase of a fast. Biologically, these are symptoms that the fast is overdue. Do not allow your physical discomfort to deter from your spiritual goal in fasting. After a day or two, these unpleasant physical reactions usually disappear.
5. Remember that hunger is partly a matter of habit. In the early stages of a fast, hunger will normally return at each mealtime. But if you hold out, the sensation of hunger will pass away without you having eaten anything. Sometimes you can fool your stomach by drinking a glass of water instead of eating.
6. Guard against constipation. Before and after fasting, choose meals that will help in this respect (fresh fruit or fruit juices, prunes, dried figs, oatmeal, etc.).

7. Generally, abstain from very strong stimulants like coffee or tea; but do not come into bondage to other people's theories of fasting. Find a pattern of fasting which suits you best as an individual.
8. Do not go on a complete fast without food and water for more than 3 full days.
9. Break your fast gradually. Begin with meals which are light and easy to digest. The longer you have fasted, the more care you need to take in how you break your fast. Eating too heavily after a fast can produce serious physical discomfort and can nullify the physical benefits of the fast. During any fast that exceeds two days, your stomach will shrink. If you train yourself to eat lightly, your stomach will adjust itself accordingly.



*'FAST forward' your progress  
in the pursuit of God's person,  
principles and purposes.*

To be Continued:

*In Session 2 we look at the Broad Personal Purpose of Fasting and the Primary New Testament Passages on fasting.*

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