

GRACE BIBLE TRAINING CENTRE (GBTC)
SCHOOL OF MINISTRY
ARUSHA - TANZANIA

SUBJECT: PRAYER & INTERCESSION

LESSON 5: FASTING & PRAYER

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Introduction: (Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:14-18; Joel 2:12-19)

Fasting is a period of voluntary denial or abstinence from all food or specific items. Fasting is not dieting, hunger strike, starvation or efforts at losing weight.

Dieting is denying the flesh for physical purposes.

Fasting is the process of bringing spiritual and physical discipline to one's life by denying the flesh and feeding the spirit. It is a time set aside to mourn or to pray with no provision for normal food or recreation needs. It is often referred to, in the Bible, as 'afflicting the soul', 'denying self' or 'mourning' (Psalms 35:13; 69:10; Joel 2:12).

Fasting is an action contrary to that first act of sin in the human race, which was eating what was forbidden. Fasting is refusing to eat what is allowed!

Fasting is the most powerful spiritual discipline of all the Christian disciplines. Through fasting and prayer, one's life can be transformed and God's awesome power released through the enabling of the Holy Spirit (1Samuel 7:9-12; Matthew 17:19-21; Mark 9:25-29).

Unfortunately, fasting is one of the most neglected spiritual admonitions. It is hoped that through this study, we can begin to explore and to experience the great benefits of regular fasts.

A major reason for fasting is for personal revival, revival for our nation, for the world and for the fulfilment of the Great Commission. But praying for our own needs and interceding for others are also important reasons to fast and pray. You can bring your personal needs before the Lord; intercede for your loved ones, your friends, your church, your pastor, your community, your nation, and the world. By your prayers of humility, as you fast, you will help the Great Commission be fulfilled.

However, do not become so caught up in praying for yourself and others that you forget about simply reverencing and praising God. True spiritual fasting focuses on God. Centre your total being on Him, your attitudes, your actions, your motives, desires, and words. This can only take place if God and His Holy Spirit are at the centre of our attention. Confess your sins as the Holy Spirit brings them to your attention and continue to focus on God and God alone so that your prayers may be powerful and effective.

Important truths to note about fasting:

Receiving God's blessing from a fast requires solid commitment. Arranging special time each day with God is absolutely crucial in attaining intimate communion with the Father. You must devote yourself to seeking God's face, even (and especially) during those times in which you feel weak, vulnerable, or irritable. Read His Word and pray during what were mealtimes. Meditate on Him when you awake in the night. Sing praises to Him whenever you please. Focus on your Heavenly Father and make every act one of praise and worship. God will enable you to experience His command to "pray without ceasing" as you seek His presence.

As you enter this time of heightened spiritual devotion, be aware that Satan will do everything he can to pull you away from your prayer and Bible reading time. When you feel the enemy trying to discourage you, immediately go to God in prayer and ask Him to strengthen your resolve in the face of difficulties and temptations.

The enemy makes you a target because he knows that fasting is the most powerful of all Christian disciplines and that God may have something very special to show you as you wait upon Him and seek His face. Satan does not want you to grow in your faith, and will do anything from making you hungry and grumpy to bringing up trouble in your family or at work to stop you. Make prayer your shield against such attacks.

A renewed closeness with God and a greater sensitivity to spiritual things are usually the results of a fast. Do not be disappointed if you do not have a "mountaintop experience," as some do. Many people who have successfully completed extended fasts tell of feeling a nearness to God that they have never before known, but others who have honestly sought His face report no particular outward results at all. For others, their fast was physically, emotionally, and spiritually gruelling, but they knew they had been called by God to fast, and they completed the fast unto Him as an act of worship; God honoured that commitment.

Your motive in fasting must be to glorify God, not to have an emotional experience, and not to attain personal happiness. When your motives are right, God will honour your seeking heart and bless your time with Him in a very special way.

Old Testament Examples:

1. Leviticus 23:27-32 - On the day of atonement, to be generally and strictly followed
2. Joshua 7:6 - Joshua prostrating before the ark at the defeat in Ai
3. Judges 20:26-28 - The 11 tribes of Israel in their battle against the tribe of Benjamin
4. 1Samuel 7:6-14 - Israelites when pressed by the Philistines
5. Exodus 34:28 - Moses on Mount Horeb for 40 days and 40 nights
6. 1Kings 19:7-8 - Elijah on the move to Mount Horeb for 40 days and 40 nights
7. Daniel 9:1-4 - Daniel in intercession for Israel

New Testament Examples:

1. Luke 2:36-37 - Prophetess Anna in the temple
2. 2Corinthians 11:27; Acts 14:23 - Apostle Paul practiced regular fasting
3. Matthew 4:1-2 - Our Lord Jesus Christ in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights

4. Acts 10:30-31 – Cornelius practiced fasting
5. Luke 5:33-35; Matthew 6:16-18; 1Corinthians 7:5 - Jesus expected His followers to fast and be sincere about it

Why should we fast?

Fasting is important and powerful, and here are some very important facts:

- Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testament eras. For example, Moses fasted at least two recorded forty-day periods. Jesus fasted 40 days and reminded His followers to fast, "when you fast," not if you fast.
- Fasting and prayer can restore the loss of the "first love" for your Lord and result in a more intimate relationship with Christ.
- Fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God (Psalms 35:13; Ezra 8:21). King David said, "I humble myself through fasting."
- Fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal your true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life.
- The Holy Spirit will quicken the Word of God in your heart and His truth will become more meaningful to you!
- Fasting can transform your prayer life into a richer and more personal experience.
- Fasting can result in a dynamic personal revival in your own life, and make you a channel of revival to others.
- Fasting and prayer are the only disciplines that fulfil the requirements of 2Chronicles 7:14 - *"If my people, who are called by my name, will 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."*

Fasting humbles you. You will discover more time to pray and seek God's face. And as He leads you to recognize and repent of unconfessed sin, you will experience special blessings from God.

How should we fast?

As you begin your fast, you should protect your health. Fasting that is done properly, will not only prove to be a spiritual blessing, but physical blessing as well.

Before commencing a fast, especially a long one, it may be wise to seek medical advice if you have a physical problem, which could make fasting unwise or dangerous. Also, if you are under any type of medication, make sure you talk to your doctor before changing your regime. Prudence and caution are in order.

In spite of the absolute safety and benefits of fasting, there are certain persons who should NEVER fast without professional supervision. For example:

- Persons who are physically too thin or emaciated
- Those who suffer weakness or anaemia
- Persons who have tumours, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood diseases, or who have heart disease

- Those who suffer chronic problems with kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, or other important organs
- Individuals who take insulin for diabetes, or suffer any other blood sugar problem
- Women who are pregnant or nursing

What are the various types of fasting and the right type to adopt?

There is no "formula fast" or the only "right" way. Fasting is about the condition of the heart, not the number of days.

It is good to start slowly. Fast for one meal a day, one day a week, or one week a month. Build up your spiritual muscles so that you will be prepared in a period of several months to fast for extended periods such as for 7 days or 40 days.

The Bible Recounts Primarily Two Types of Fasts

A partial fast is described in the book of Daniel. Although the water fast seemed to be the custom of the prophet, there was a three-week period in which he only abstained from "delicacies," meat, and wine (Daniel 10:3).

The two primary types mentioned in the Bible are the "**absolute**" and "**supernatural absolute**" fasts. These are total fasts - no food (solid or liquid) and no water. Paul went on an absolute fast for three days following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). Moses and Elijah engaged in what must be considered a supernatural absolute fast of forty days (Deuteronomy 9:9; I Kings 19:8).

For long fasts, it is important to be led by the Lord.

Water-only fasts that last for more than several days need to be undertaken with complete rest and under medical supervision. Water and juice fasting is recommended for long fasts.

When it comes to making your final decision about what type of fast is right for you, the best advice is to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. He will guide your heart and mind as to what is best for you. Remember, the most important consideration in fasting is your motive. Why are you fasting? To seek something personally from God's hand or to seek His face in worship, praise and thanksgiving?

How to maintain the body during fasting:

How long you fast, the kind of fast you undertake, and how you adjust your work schedule depends mostly on your occupation. Persons with office jobs, pastors, or homemakers may find it easier to continue their duties and fast for longer periods of time. Though there are many who engage in strenuous physical labour and have enjoyed their extended fast. If you are so engaged, you may wish to fast only one or more days of the week, limiting yourselves to partial fasting. Or you may look to weekends as the prime time to abstain from food. Remember too, fasting during major holidays is not always a good idea. Families may be inconvenienced, and temptations to eat can be overwhelming.

Reasons for schedule adjustments, especially during an extended fast, are two-fold:

The first is physical. Throughout your fast, you may feel somewhat weaker than normal. During the first few days, you may feel tired and irritable. Lightening your workload and cutting down on strenuous exercise would be a very good idea to maintain your health and your morale.

The second reason is spiritual. Fasting is not just denying yourself food, it is exchanging the needs of the physical body for those of the spiritual. Long times of prayer and reading God's Word will be very essential if you are to enter into a more intimate communion with God to maintain your fast to its completion. While fasting, if you dissipate your energy on numerous errands or busy work to the neglect of spending special time with God, you will starve both physically and spiritually. You will find yourself becoming discouraged and frustrated with your fast instead of being benefited and uplifted and blessed.

The more time you spend with God in fellowship, worship, and adoration of Him, and the more you read and meditate upon His Word, the greater your effectiveness will be in prayer and the more meaningful your fast will be.

Physical Effects of fasting:

Although fasting can be an indescribable blessing, it is not always easy for everyone. In this time of discipline, self-sacrifice and reflection, do not be surprised if you experience mental and physical discomforts.

To begin, you may experience some inner conflict when you deny yourself the pleasure of eating delicious food. Any sort of fast may sometimes leave you feeling impatient and irritable. During a 3-day fast, this struggle can intensify toward the end of the second day. That seems to be a favourite time for the "self" to rise up and say, "This is as far as I want to go. I have done enough."

The following are few examples of the physical effects of fasting:

1. Hunger Pangs: These are greatest usually during the first three days of the fast. Your body is adjusting from using the food in your digestive tract (which remains about three days) to consuming stored fats.
2. Coldness, bad breath and heightened body odour, changes in elimination (constipation or diarrhoea), light-headedness, changes in sleeping and dreaming patterns, aches and pains.
3. Headaches or stomachaches may be a result of salt, sugar, or caffeine withdrawal.
4. Lower back pain may indicate that you are dehydrating. Drink more fluids.
5. Dizziness may be caused by a sudden change in position, such as rising suddenly from a chair. Stop for a second or two, then recover. Move slowly.
6. Minor fasting discomfort

During your fast, you may have your struggles, discomforts, spiritual victories, and failures. In the morning you may feel like you are on top of the world, but by evening you may be wrestling with the flesh - sorely tempted to raid the refrigerator and counting how many more days are left in your fast. This is especially true if you are new at fasting. To

counteract temptations like these, take extra time with the Lord to spend with God. Step outside for fresh air and a moderate walk of a mile or two, and talk to the Lord as you walk along. And in the process always keep on sipping water or juice frequently during your waking hours.

How to complete the fast:

All the experts agree that "breaking the fast" is the critical phase of fasting. While your body is in the resting mode, your stomach shrinks and your intestines become idle, so solid food must be re-introduced very slowly to avoid kidney failure or digestive distress. It is recommended that after a 40-day fast, you should make a careful transition for at least three days before returning to eating meats or fats or normal foods.

Further, if you end your fast gradually, the beneficial physical and spiritual effects will linger for days. But if you rush into solid foods, you may lose much of your deep sense of peace and experience physical problems such as diarrhoea, sickness, fainting, and frankly even death in some cases, due to shock!

Most experts agree that breaking a fast with vegetables, either steamed or raw, is best. Your stomach is smaller now, so eat lightly. Stop before you feel full. Stay away from starches like pastas, potatoes, rice, or bread for at least a week. Also, avoid meats, dairy products, and any fats or oils for a week or more. Introduce them very slowly and in small amounts.

Extended fasts are not the only fasts, which need to be ended with caution. Even a 3-day fast requires reasonable precautions. It is wise to start with a little soup -- something thin and nourishing such as vegetable soup and fresh fruits such as watermelon and orange.