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SESSION 6 — FASTING

Be with Jesus • Become like Jesus • Do what He did

1. The Heart Behind Fasting: "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." — 1 Corinthians 10:31

In Matthew 6:1–18, Jesus teaches that when we give, pray or fast, our motives matter as much as our actions. He warns against practising righteousness to win praise from others. Spiritual practices do not earn God's favour or make us holy through the activity alone. They are ways of responding to His grace, honouring Him and making ourselves available to the Holy Spirit's transforming work.

Jesus' expectation: "When you fast"

Jesus says, "when you give" (Matthew 6:2), "when you pray" (6:5), and "when you fast" (6:16)—not "if." He expects fasting to have a place in His disciples' lives, and teaches them to practise it discreetly, not for human recognition.

Jesus fasted before His public ministry (Matthew 4:1–4) and anticipated that His disciples would fast after the bridegroom was taken away (Matthew 9:14–15).

We follow Him not because fasting is a condition of salvation, but because we desire to be with Jesus, become like Him and do what He did. The New Testament does not impose a universal fasting schedule.

Key passages: Matthew 6:1–18 • Matthew 4:1–4 • Matthew 9:14–17 • 1 Corinthians 10:31

2. What Fasting Is — and What It Is Not

Biblical fasting is deliberately going without food for a limited time to seek God, normally while continuing to drink water. It is a bodily expression of worship, humility, repentance, grief or earnest prayer.
Hunger is not the goal; turning toward God is.

A restricted diet, giving up social media, or avoiding entertainment may be useful disciplines, but they are not the same as abstaining from food. Daniel 10:2–3 describes abstaining from particular food in mourning; this is a related practice rather than a complete food fast.

Fasting is not a weight-loss programme, a way to bargain with God, or proof of spiritual superiority. The Bible does not promise that fasting improves metabolism, blood pressure, immunity or longevity. Our focus here is its spiritual purpose.

3. Fasting Throughout Scripture — What Do We See?

The Bible records fasting in different circumstances. These are examples of people seeking God, not formulas guaranteeing a particular outcome.

Setting	Biblical examples	What the passage shows
Repentance and return	Jonah 3:5–10; Joel 2:12–17	Fasting accompanied a genuine turning away from evil.
Crisis and danger	2 Chronicles 20:1–13; Esther 4:15–17	Communities humbled themselves and sought God's help.
Grief and petition	2 Samuel 12:16–23; Nehemiah 1:4–11	Fasting expressed sorrow and earnest prayer; the desired result was not guaranteed.
Guidance and ministry	Ezra 8:21–23; Acts 13:1–3; Acts 14:23	Prayer and fasting accompanied seeking God and commissioning leaders.

Important: Scripture records God responding to fasting joined with repentance and prayer, but fasting never obliges God to give us the outcome we want.

4. Why We Fast — Four Biblical Purposes

A. Express Our Heart to God — Worship, Love and Devotion

Fasting can give physical expression to love, humility, sorrow, repentance and dependence on God.

- Offer ourselves: Romans 12:1–2 calls us to present our bodies as living sacrifices in response to God's mercy. Fasting can express: "Lord, You matter more than my immediate comfort."
- Express repentance or grief: God calls His people to return with fasting and a changed heart (Joel 2:12–13); Nehemiah fasted in grief over Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4).
- Give, rather than bargain: We offer time, attention and willing obedience. Hunger can remind us to rely on God's Word (Matthew 4:4).

The lesson: Our fast is an expression of the heart, offered to God—not a performance for others.

B. Focus Our Mind on God — Prayer and Discernment

Prayer is communion with God: we speak to Him and attend to His Word and the leading of His Spirit. Fasting can set aside ordinary mealtime routines for focused prayer and worship.

- Make time: Use the period normally spent preparing and eating a meal to read Scripture and pray.
- Seek wisdom: Ezra fasted while seeking God's protection (Ezra 8:21–23); at Antioch, the church was worshipping and fasting when the Holy Spirit directed its mission (Acts 13:1–3).
- Bring burdens: Jehoshaphat and Judah sought God in a national crisis (2 Chronicles 20:3–4).

Some call this "amplifying prayer." It can mean greater attention, earnestness and surrender—not that God is deaf to ordinary prayer or that fasting forces an answer.

The lesson: We seek God with greater intention, while remaining open to His will.

C. Exercise Our Will and Grow in Holiness — Self-Control and Surrender

Holiness means belonging to God and increasingly reflecting His character. The body is God's good gift (1 Corinthians 6:19–20); our struggle is against sin and disordered desires, not against the body itself (Galatians 5:16–24).

- Practise self-control: Say "not now" to a good appetite, remembering that we need not be mastered by our desires (1 Corinthians 6:12).
- Recognise what surfaces: Hunger may expose impatience, pride, selfishness or reliance on comfort. Hunger and tiredness themselves are not sins.
- Reorder desires: Let hunger prompt prayer and attention to God rather than immediate gratification.

- Depend on the Spirit: Confess sinful responses and ask for His power to put sinful deeds to death (Romans 8:13); self-control is fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).

The lesson: Repeated choices can form habits, but only God can transform our character.

D. Express Love Through Compassion and Generosity — Love in Action

Isaiah 58:3–12 rebukes people who fast while exploiting workers, quarrelling and neglecting those in need. God desires justice, mercy and obedience—not merely abstinence.

- Stand in solidarity with those who regularly go hungry.
- Give the value of a missed meal to someone in need, if possible.
- Let fasting lead to practical care, fairness and reconciliation (1 John 3:16–18).

The lesson: Love for God must be reflected in how we treat our neighbour.

5. How Fasting Makes Room for the Holy Spirit

The Bible does not say that hunger automatically brings spiritual power. It teaches that the Holy Spirit transforms us (Romans 8:13). "Making room" describes our deliberate response: instead of merely enduring hunger, we turn to God in faith and obedience.

What happens when I fast	What I can do	Biblical connection
Hunger reminds me of my limits.	Pause: "Father, I need You more than comfort." Read or recall a verse.	Jesus answered temptation during His fast with God's Word (Matthew 4:1–4).
An impatient or selfish reaction surfaces.	Recognise it; confess if sinful; ask the Spirit for a different response.	Walk by the Spirit, not sinful desires (Galatians 5:16–23).
My usual mealtimes become available.	Pray, read Scripture and seek wisdom without demanding a message.	The church worshipped and fasted as the Spirit directed mission (Acts 13:2–3).
I notice another person's need.	Respond through generosity, mercy or reconciliation.	God rebuked fasting without justice and care (Isaiah 58:6–10).

The Holy Spirit does not gain power because we skip food. Fasting can make us more attentive to what God is teaching, more willing to surrender, and more ready to obey. A quiet fast with no dramatic experience can still be a faithful act of worship.

6. Types and Rhythms of Fasting

- Normal food fast: No food for a limited period, while drinking water. A short version is a practical starting point.
- Short fast: Missing one meal or fasting for part of a day. Scripture does not prescribe a universal minimum length.
- Corporate fast: A church or community seeks God together (Joel 2:15–17; Acts 13:1–3). Each person should participate discreetly and safely.
- Responsive fast: In grief, repentance, crisis or major decisions (Esther 4; Nehemiah 1).
- Regular rhythm: Some early Christians fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. This is historical church practice, not a universal biblical requirement.
- Partial food abstinence: Daniel 10:2–3 describes restricted foods; it is related but distinct from complete food abstinence.

- No-food-and-water fast: Exceptional biblical examples exist (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9); do not imitate these as a beginner.

Jesus' forty-day wilderness fast was extraordinary, not a starting target. The Gospels do not give us a routine schedule of fasting throughout His ministry.

7. How to Begin — A Practical Guide for First-Time Fasters

Before — Prepare Your Heart and Your Day

- Choose one purpose: worship, repentance, prayer for someone, seeking wisdom or compassion.
- If food fasting is medically appropriate for you, begin with ONE missed meal, not a multi-day fast. Drink water.
- Select a short passage (for example, Matthew 6:16–18 or Matthew 4:4) and a simple prayer focus.
- Plan a quiet time in place of the meal. Keep your practice private.

During — Turn Hunger into Prayer

- When hungry, pray: "Father, I offer myself to You. Holy Spirit, teach me to trust and obey Jesus."
- Use the meal period for prayer and Scripture. As you work or care for others, return to God with short prayers.
- Pay attention to how you treat others. If you respond unkindly, acknowledge it and make amends.
- Stop if you feel faint, dizzy, confused or unwell.

After — Respond and Reflect

- Break the fast sensibly and thank God for His provision of food.
- If possible, give the value of the missed meal to someone in need.

Food fasting is not suitable for everyone. Those who have medical conditions or who take medicines requiring regular food should not undertake food fast without individual medical guidance.

8. Common Difficulties — And What to Do

Difficulty	Practical response
"I am hungry, tired or irritable."	Start smaller; hydrate; reduce demands; stop if unwell. Hunger is not a reason to mistreat others.
"I keep thinking about food."	Let the thought prompt a brief prayer. Do not treat distraction as failure.
"I do not hear God speaking."	Read Scripture and pray faithfully; do not force a message or expect dramatic revelation.
"I am too busy."	Start with one manageable meal; schedule your prayer time beforehand.
"I want people to notice."	Return to Matthew 6:16–18 and seek the Father's approval rather than praise.
"I cannot safely fast from food."	Choose prayer, giving or another safe form of abstinence; seek medical advice if unsure.
"I tried it and disliked it."	Review the purpose and duration. Aim for sustainable practice, not an impressive achievement.

Closing Encouragement

We fast because Jesus taught and modelled it. We do not fast to impress people, earn salvation or force God to act. We offer Him our whole selves in worship, prayer, surrender and love. Fasting is the practice; the Holy Spirit is the One who transforms us into the likeness of Jesus.

Further Scripture Reading

Old Testament

- Exodus 34:28 — Moses' extraordinary forty-day fast before God; not a model for ordinary fasting.
- Leviticus 16:29–31; 23:26–32 — The Day of Atonement and the call to humble oneself before God.
- 1 Samuel 7:3–6 — Israel fasts while confessing sin and putting away idols.
- Psalm 35:13; 69:10 — Fasting as an expression of humility, sorrow and distress.
- Daniel 10:2–3 — Abstaining from choice foods during mourning; a related but different discipline.

New Testament

- Luke 2:36–38 — Anna worships God with prayer and fasting.
- Luke 18:9–14 — Jesus warns against religious pride; the Pharisee boasts about fasting twice a week.
- Acts 9:8–9 — Saul goes without food and drink after meeting Jesus; the passage does not explicitly call it a formal fast.
- Colossians 2:16–23 — Harsh bodily rules cannot themselves overcome sinful desires; a safeguard against legalism.