

FASTING...



One of the things that characterizes the Coptic Orthodox Church is the practice of Fasting. Fasting is an essential element of the spiritual life of the Coptic Orthodox Christian. Our Lord, Christ Jesus fasted 40 days (Mt 4:2) be-

fore He began His earthly ministry and, through His example, taught us to fast. Also, Moses (Ex 34:28) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), the prophets of the Old Testament fasted, as well as King David and the people of Nineveh, just to mention a few. So fasting was not something 'invented' by the Church, nor is it a 'man-made' custom or tradition, as some people think, but it was a rule established by God Himself.

And if we understand 'fasting' to mean abstaining from food, then we can consider that fasting was the very first commandment given by God. We see this in God's words to Adam where He said "...you shall not eat [of the tree of knowledge of good and evil]. (Gen 2:16-17)



Also, in the New Testament, fasting was practiced by the Disciples (Acts 13:2-3) and by St. Paul the Apostle (Acts 27:21).

Following these examples in the Old and New Testaments, the Coptic Orthodox Christian practices fasting as an integral part of his spiritual life. What is the purpose of Fasting and how should one fast? What benefit can one receive from fasting? What does the Holy Bible say about fasting? And what do the Fathers and Saints of the Church say about fasting? Let us consider the following:

What is the purpose of Fasting? The purpose of fasting is to gain control over oneself and to strengthen the spirit and the will. The Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane said "...the spirit indeed is

willing, but the flesh is weak". (Mk 14:38) So by fasting, one weakens the flesh and strengthens the spirit. Why does this strengthen the spirit and the will? Well, if we consider that eating is the most needed and most powerful human desire, then by abstaining from it, one can train and strengthen his will-power. And when the person strengthens his will-power, he can resist temptation in his life. So, if one can gain control over the most powerful and basic human need through fasting, then one can control many desires in his life. For example, if one can control his desire to eat meat, then by the same token he can control his anger, jealousy, pride, laziness and lust of the flesh etc So, the one who fasts frees himself from the physical life and weakens his body, therefore he concentrates more on his spiritual life and strengthens his spirit and will.

What benefit can one receive from Fasting?



1. By Fasting one rises above the level of the body by denying its need and learns how to depend on spiritual nourishment. Unlike Eve, who when she "saw that the tree was good for food [and] pleasant to the eyes, she took of its fruit and ate [and] also gave to her husband...and he ate." (Gen 3:6). Also remember what the Lord said to the devil "...man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4)

2. By Fasting one can conquer the devil. "this kind [devil] can not come out by nothing but prayer and fasting Mk 9:29

3. By Fasting one can be free from passions and lusts. The desert Fathers teach us that food is related to lust and provokes the flesh to sin. St. Isaac of Syria says "...Meager food at the table...cleanses the soul from passion...for the work of fasting and vigils is the beginning of every effort against sin and lust. Almost all passionate drives decrease through fasting."

4. Usually much time is lost in preparing food, but by preparing simpler fasting food, one will have more time to pray, to read the Bible and spiritual books.

5. By Fasting one learns how to live an ascetic life. This is done to subject the body to hunger and thirst. Like St. Paul says "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection..." 1 Cor 9:27. He who subjects his body becomes aware of his

weakness and relies more on God and his prayers will be more frequent and profound. When the body is humbled by an ascetic life, the person feels the need for God's support and strength.



How should one Fast?

Besides eating vegetarian food and abstaining for a period of time, one must fast from sin. You see... God does not take pleasure if we do not eat, for even the devil does not eat. Nor does God take pleasure in our suffering or discomfort when we fast. But He takes pleasure in a fast that is focused on stopping sin and gaining virtue. This is the spiritual fast that is acceptable in the eyes of God. This is the true fast! St. John Chrysostom puts it best when he says...

"Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your deeds. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let your mouth fast, but also the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of greed. Let the feet fast by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eye fast by disciplining it not to look at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from chicken, and fish, but bite and devour our brothers?" —St. John Chrysostom

"Is it possible for one who fasts not to be rewarded for his fasting? How? When we abstain from foods, but do not abstain from sin, when we do not eat meat, but chew to pieces the homes of the poor; when we do not become drunk with wine, but we become drunk with evil pleasures, when we abstain all the day, but all the night we spend watching lustful shows. Then what is the benefit from fasting?" —St. John Chrysostom

The acceptable fast is not a fast from food alone, but from every form of evil in one's life and everything that takes us away from God. If we fast in this way, we will experience growth in our spiritual life.



What does the Holy Bible say about Fasting?



"Then I proclaimed a fast there...that we might **humble** ourselves before our God and to **seek** from Him the right way for us..."

—Ezra 8:21

"Is this not the fast...to **loose the bonds** of wickedness, to **undo** the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free... is it not to **share** your bread with the hungry...and bring to your house the poor who are cast out. When you see the naked, that you **cover** him...then your **healing** shall spring forth speedily and ...the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and **the Lord will answer**; you shall cry and He will say 'Here I am'

—Isaiah 58:6-9

"Thus says the Lord to this people...**they have not restrained their feet** therefore the Lord does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now and punish...then...when they fast I will not hear their cry and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them."

—Jeremiah 14:10-12

"**Consecrate** a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land...and **cry out** to the Lord"

—Joel 1:14

"Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, **sanctify** the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the Lord **weep**...and...let them say **spare** Your people O Lord and do not give Your heritage to reproach"

—Joel 2:15-17

"So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them...let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock taste anything, do not let them eat or

drink water. But let man and beast ...**cry** mightily to God, let everyone **turn from his evil way**...then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it."

—Jonah 3:5-10

"When you fasted and mourned...**did you really fast for Me- - for Me?** When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves? Should you not have obeyed...?"

—Zechariah 7:5-7

"Moreover **when you fast**, do not be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance [face]...but when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that you **do not appear** to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in a secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will **reward** you openly"

—Matthew 6:16-18

"Then the disciples of John came to Him saying, why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast? And Jesus said to them, can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But **the days will come** when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, **and then they will fast**"

—Matthew 9:14-15

Did You Know...?

1. The Wednesday and Friday fast has been observed in the Church since the late first century? (Written in the Didache - a first century document called "The Teaching of the 12 Apostles" Chapter 8



2. The reason why we fast Wednesdays is to remember the betrayal of the Lord by Judas Iscariot. Also, the reason why we fast Fridays is to remember the Crucifixion of our Lord.

