

Fasting

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Introduction

The Holy Bible describes such a beautiful scene in Matthew 17, Mark 9 and Luke 9, where three men, who perfected the meaning of fasting, were illuminating the earth and standing with heavenly glory.

The first man was Moses the prophet where The Bible says:

- ✠ “So he was there with the Lord **forty days and forty nights**; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments” (Exodus 34: 28)

The second man was Elijah the prophet where The Bible says:

- ✠ “Then as he (Elijah) lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, ‘Arise and eat’. Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came back the second time, and touched him, and said, ‘Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you’. So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food **forty days and forty nights** as far as Horeb, the mountain of God” (1 Kings 19: 5-8)

The Third man is the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, where The Bible says:

- ✠ “And when He had fasted **forty days and forty nights**, afterward He was hungry” (Matthew 4: 2)

These verses explain that fasting can lead righteous people to an amazing and glorified way of transfiguration. This is one of the reasons why God commanded man to fast from the beginning of creation. God commanded Adam and Eve, and all their descendants, to abstain from some specific type of fruits; as simplified by this simple commandment:

- ✠ “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat’; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2: 16-17)

By abstaining from specific type of food, we elevate ourselves above bodily and materialistic lusts; as the Bible teaches us:

- ✠ “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings” (Genesis 3: 6-7)

- ✠ “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4: 4, Luke 4: 4, Deuteronomy 8: 3)

With this understanding, prophets, apostles, and all believers in the Old and New Testaments honored and observed fasting. Let us study few examples.

Old Testament

- ✠ “David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground” (2 Samuel 12: 16)
- ✠ “I humbled myself with fasting” (Psalms 35: 13)
- ✠ “I wept and chastened my soul with fasting” (Psalms 69: 10)
- ✠ “My knees are weak through fasting” (Psalms 109: 24)
- ✠ “Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes” (Daniel 9: 3)
- ✠ “And they said to me, ‘The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire’. So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1: 3-4)
- ✠ “‘Now, therefore,’ says the Lord, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning’. So rend your heart, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm” (Joel 2: 12-13)
- ✠ “Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers, night and day” (Luke 2:36-37)

New Testament

- ✠ “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: 15)
- ✠ “However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17: 21)

The Apostles understood this commandment perfectly well and did fast immediately after the ascension of the Lord. Here is just a few examples:

- ✠ “The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance” (Acts 10: 9-10)
- ✠ “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13: 2-3)
- ✠ “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14: 23)
- ✠ “In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings” (2 Corinthians 6: 5)
- ✠ “In weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2 Corinthians 11: 27)

Types of Food during Fasting

Now, let us talk about this “fascinating” topic that is debated by almost everyone to stay away either from fasting or from the type of food that Christians should eat during fasting.

To start off, you ought to know that God created man AND animals (you read it right, even animals) as vegetarians from the beginning of creation. Let us read what the Bible says in this regard:

✠ “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ And God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. **Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food**’; and it was so. Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day” (Genesis 1: 27-31)

Even after being cast out of the Garden of Eden, Adam lived vegetarian; as God commanded him:

✠ “And you shall eat the herb of the field” (Genesis 3: 18)

God did not permit man to eat any kind of dairy products and meat until after the flood; as He commanded Noah saying:

✠ “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. **But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood (no rare, medium rare or any uncooked meat; as I explained in church with more Biblical verses)**” (Genesis 9: 3-4)

Also, when the Lord led His people in the wilderness, He fed them vegetarian food; which was called Manna:

✠ “And the house of Israel called its name Manna. And it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey” (Exodus 16: 31)

When the people got so weak, not trusting in God’s commandment, and cried out for meat, God fulfilled their sinful desires but punished them severely:

✠ “Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: Who will give us meat to eat...? Then you shall say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt’. Therefore, the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the Lord who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying: Why did we ever come up out of Egypt... **But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague.** So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving” (Numbers 11: 4-34)

Therefore, the Coptic Church takes God's commandments seriously, not to bring any plagues on her people, and ask all Copts to fast with vegetarian food only.

Here are few examples of how godly people fasted with vegetarian food only:

- ✠ "Take also unto yourself wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentils, and millet, and spelt, and put them in one vessel, and make yourself bread thereof; according to the number of the days that you shall lie upon your side, even three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat thereof" (Ezekiel 4:9)
- ✠ "Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink" (Daniel 1: 12)
- ✠ "I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled" (Daniel 10: 3)

Benefits of Vegetarian Fasting

1. A great feeling of bodily rest from digesting hard food (meat, etc.).
2. A better chance of relief from cholesterol.
3. A period of slashing calories and burning fats.
4. An opportunity of getting lots of vitamins and proteins that can work like medications against various diseases (many medicines are made from herbs and veggies).
5. An opportunity of feeling energetic most of the time.
6. An opportunity of getting better and stronger brain functions.

Most importantly, fasting gives us a feeling of the release of the spirit to contemplate in heavenly things, because we think about that spiritual food that endures to everlasting life; as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us saying:

- ✠ "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him" (John 6: 27)

Also, learn from St. Paul this important lesson:

- ✠ "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors -- not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8: 5-14)

Unacceptable and Rejected Types of Fasting

1. Fasting to gain praise of men

✠ “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, 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 the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 6: 16-18)

2. Fasting full of pride and conceit

✠ “Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess’” (Luke 18: 9-12)

3. Fasting for a sinful cause

✠ “And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy” (Acts 23: 12-13)

4. Fasting without repentance

✠ “Thus says the Lord to this people: Thus they have loved to wander, they have not restrained their feet. Therefore, the Lord does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now, and punish their sins. Then the Lord said to me: Do not pray for this people, for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Jeremiah 14:10-12)

5. Fasting without mercy and almsgiving

✠ “‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?’ In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, to make your voice heard on high. Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord. Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh” (Isaiah 58: 3-7)

6. Fasting not for godly reasons

Many people worry so much about their health and follow doctors’ orders in special diet or to watch for their weight, their look, their acceptance and admiration by coworkers, beauty pagan, sport requirements, etc. Although the church is not against people to take care of themselves and their health and diet, etc., but why you want to please man, but refuse to obey God. Remember this commandment by St. Peter:

✠ “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5: 29)

Virtues and Merits of Fasting

1. Fasting is always accompanied by repentance. It is an opportunity to humble myself before God and get closer to Him. During fasting, my mind is set on things above, higher than materialistic and carnal lusts that can help me have a real taste of heaven.
2. Fasting is always accompanied by prayers. We feel so honest and sincere about our spiritual worship, which takes us far away from gossip and judging of others.
3. Fasting is always accompanied by humbleness. We feel the need to submit to God and weep for our sins and for the bad things that we did and the good things that we did not do, while having the chance to do it.
4. Fasting is always accompanied by seclusion. It is a time of being with God alone for contemplation and reflection and hearing the voice of God, without the interruption and noises of this world.
5. Fasting is always accompanied by purity of heart, mind and tongue. It is our opportunity to offer ourselves to God as a sacrifice of praise.
6. Fasting is always accompanied by self control and perseverance. It is a time to practice patience, gentleness and love to all mankind, inside and outside of your home, in the street, at work, on the road where you run into strangers and difficult drivers, etc.
7. Fasting is always accompanied by metanias and ascetic behavior. This teaches us to humble ourselves before God and man and to love everyone and accept all godly people with all their weaknesses; since we all struggle to become godly.

Questions about Fasting

Q1: what is the meaning of “Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly”?

A1: This was said in the Book of Joel, where he said:

✠ “Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, And cry out to the Lord ...Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly” (Joel 1: 14, 2: 15)

The word “consecrate” means in its original Greek word “to make holy or to dedicate to a higher purpose”. For example, we read in the Old Testament the following commandment from God:

✠ “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine” (Exodus 13: 2)

So, this means to keep the first born holy and dedicate to them to serve Me (higher purpose); as it is clearly explained in the Ten Commandments:

✠ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20: 8)

We also read how god dedicated special cloths for priesthood who only serve God:

✠ “And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. So they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons, that he may minister to Me as priest” (Exodus 28: 4)

So “consecration” here means dedication of fast to God; as I explained above. So days of fasting must be for prayers, humbleness, love, forgiveness, gentleness, almsgiving, purity, kindness, etc.

Q2: What is the meaning of St. Paul's teaching that says "let no one judge you in food or in drink"?

A2: Let us read exactly what St. Paul said:

- ✠ "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Colossians 2: 16-17)
- ✠ "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4: 1-3)

I just wonder what these verses have to do with fasting? Why people try to make their own interpretations that fit their my mind and personal desires.

The verse clearly say, "let no one judge you in food or in drink". It didn't say, "let no one judge you in fasting". This means, don't worry about what the different types of food that God prevented the Jews from eating them. God, out of His love to His children, commanded the Jews not to eat specific foods that could be source of illness to them since medicine didn't develop yet to the way we see it in the new Testament.

God proved this meaning when He commanded Peter to eat whatever was presented to him in a vision. Let us read along:

- ✠ "The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat'. But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean'. And a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common'. This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again" (Acts 10: 9-16)

Of course, this has also the bigger meaning of accepting the gentiles, who were considered as common or unclean by the Jews.

Additionally, it happened back in the days, that some heretics banned marriage, eating of meat, etc., like the Montanism. These heretics were excommunicated by the church.

Q3: Why not just everyone fast his way and in secret, instead of a communal fast? Is there any biblical teaching about group of people fasting?

A3: There are so many Biblical examples and teaching of communal (group, or assembly or church) fasting:

- ✠ "So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3: 5)

- ✠ “Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4: 15-16)
- ✠ “Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions” (Ezra 8: 21)
- ✠ “Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads” (Nehemiah 9: 1)
- ✠ “‘Now, therefore,’ says the Lord, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.’ So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him -- A grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2: 12-15)

Q4: Why does the church set fast times and not leave it to everyone, as he wills?

A4: Having planned and scheduled fast time is a Biblical teaching. For example, Zachariah says:

- ✠ “Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah. Therefore love truth and peace” (Zachariah 8: 19)

References:

1. The Holy Bible
2. Books and sermons by H.H. Pope Shenouda.
3. Series of Simplifying the Faith by H.E. Metropolitan Anba Bishoy.