

LENT

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The church celebrates the lent each year to remind believers that Jesus fasted for forty days to demonstrate the effectiveness of fast in facing the temptations of the devil. Before the Lord was led up by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, He fasted 40 days and 40 nights to be prepared for the fight, which He won. (Matt. 4:1-11, Lk 4:1-13). He gave us himself as an example to follow, declaring that the only way to overcome the devil is through prayer and fasting (Matt 17:21; Mk 9:29).

What is the fast?

The definition of fast is to abstain or hold back from something (e.g., food, habit or desire) by your own choice. Fast, in a broader sense, is to abstain from evil deeds, bad habits, or sin that keeps you away from God or suppresses your spiritual life. Isaiah 58:6-8. Fasting from food is a command from God, Matt 6:16-18.

The sin that cast Eve and Adam out of the paradise was the lust to the earthly pleasures and the desire to eat. Eve saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye. She ate some and gave some to her husband, and he ate it, Gen 3:6. Man did not eat meat until after the flood of Noah Gen 9:3.

The purpose of fasting

Fasting by itself is not an ultimate goal. Through controlling our desires to eat, we hope to strengthen our spirits so we do not let any evil desire or sin to reign over our bodies, but to live according to the Spirit of God, so we become sons of God (Rom 8:14).

The bible warns us in Gal 5:17 that "the flesh desires against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want". Notice the inverse relationship between the flesh (i.e., the sinful nature) and the spirit. Therefore, St. Paul said, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" 1 Co 9:27.

Jesus said "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" Matt 4:4; Deut 8:3. The book of Ecclesiastes, 12:1 reminds us "the dust (flesh) returns to the ground it came from and the spirit returns to God who gave it". In

Matt 6:31, 33, God said "do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well.

Is fasting an important practice in Christianity?

Jesus himself, the Son of God, gave us Himself as an example to show the importance of fast in our struggle against the devil. Before he was led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil, he fasted forty days and forty nights. He passed the temptation successfully, Matt 4:1-11.

When the disciples failed to cast out an evil spirit from a man, Jesus told them "this kind (i.e., the devil) can come out only by prayer and fasting" Mk 9:29. The message here is that fasting is an important means by which we can overcome the devil and stand against his temptations. Furthermore, Our Lord Jesus Christ expects us to fast Mt 9:14, 15 & Mk 2:18-20; and taught us how to practice fasting Mt 6:16-18. Based on that, the Coptic Orthodox Church arranged fast for the whole church to practice as the one body of Christ. During fast we lift our heart to the Lord with one spirit and control our desires not only from food but also from any other desires that separate us from God and may result in losing the eternal life.

Fasting in the Old Testament:

The time of fast is good for repentance. In the book of Joel 2:12-15 God says "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning... who knows? He may return and have pity... Declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly".

The people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them ... When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened". Jonah 3:5-10

God accepted even the fast of Ahab "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel ... then say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood ... When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted ... Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he humbled himself before me, I will not bring this disaster in his days, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son." Notice the effect of prayer, fast, tears and humility on God's heart. 1 Kings 21:17-29

Moses before he received the two tables of the Testimony from the Lord, he was on the mount of Sinai with the Lord for forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water Exodus 34:28; 24:18.

There are many examples in the Old Testament to show the importance of fast before God. Read Judges 20:26, 1 Kings 19:8; Isaiah 58:6,7.

Fasting in the early church

Praying and fasting before starting any project or taking any decision was the common practice in the early church (and should be in our life as well), Acts 13: 2,3 and 14: 23 & 2 Co. 6: 3-10 & 2 Co. 11:23-30. St. Paul emphasized the fast as one of the principles in his ministry "But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in riots in hard work, in sleepless nights, in fasting; by pureness, by knowledge, by long suffering, by kindness, in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love" 2 Co 6:4-6. He also mentioned the same principles in 2 Co 11:27 "In weariness and painfulness, in watching often, in hunger and thirst, in fasting often, in cold and nakedness".

Why sometimes God does not consider our fast?

The Lord answered this question in Isaiah 58: 3-12 He says "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard". Notice the promises of the Lord to those who fast from the evil and show a positive signs to their growth in the spiritual life. God does not accept the superficial fast but the one from the bottom of the heart Lk 10-14.

Fast should be accompanied by prayers, giving to the needy, and other virtuous such as love, chastity, reading in the bible. It should be a time of repentance, confession, and growing spiritually. It should benefit the spirit more than the body, Matt. 15:11 & 1 Co 8:8.