

**“The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.”
(Mt 9:15)**

✠ Lecture VIII: On Fasting ✠

✠ Fasting in the Coptic Church:

When we fast, we abstain from food and water for a certain period of time that can be determined through the guidance of the father in confession depending on one's spiritual level and health condition. Generally speaking, the abstinence period ends at three o'clock in the afternoon because at this hour [the ninth hour] Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross and saved us. After the end of the abstinence period, we break our fast and only eat vegetarian food, however, since we fast more than half the days of the year, the Church has allowed the congregation to eat fish during certain fasting periods.

In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, answer some of the frequently asked questions about fasting:

Q1: Our Lord said that fasting should be “in secret” (Mt 6:18) thus shouldn't fasting be left to the individual to decide when to fast?

A1: Our Lord also said that prayer should be “in secret” (Mt 6:6) yet we still go to church on set days and pray as a congregation. Praying in secret does not contradict congregational prayers. Likewise, set seasons for congregational fasting do not contradict the commandment of fasting in secret. Moreover, even if the fasting seasons are set, the depth of each one's fasting and the personal periods of abstinence can remain in secret. There are many biblical examples of congregational fasting:

- The whole congregation fasted together and God accepted their fast (**Esther 4**).
- Everybody in Nineveh fasted together (**Jonah 3**).
- Congregational fasting is obvious from the words of Joel the Prophet, “Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation...” (**Joel 2:15**)
- St. Paul fasted with all the people on the ship (**Acts 27:21**).
- The apostles fasted together (**Acts 13:2,3**).
- The principle of having set dates for fasting has its origins in Holy Scripture, “The fasting of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth ...” (**Zech 8:19**)

Q2: What are the times of fast in the Coptic Church?

A2: The Coptic Church fasts over half the days of the year:

- The Advent fast that ends with the Holy Nativity feast (43 days in length / fish allowed)
- Jonah's fast (3 days / no fish allowed)
- The Holy Great Lent that ends with the Holy Resurrection feast (55 days in length / no fish allowed)
- The Apostles fast that ends with the feast of martyrdom of Ss Paul & Peter (length varies / fish allowed)
- St. Mary's fast that ends with the feast of the assumption of her body (14 days / fish allowed)
- Every Wednesday & Friday except during the fifty days after the Holy Resurrection (no fish allowed) – commemorates the plotting of the Jews to crucify our Savior on Wednesday and the crucifixion on Friday.

→ During the fasts where fish is allowed, it is allowed only on all days except Wednesday & Friday. Moreover, on Saturday & Sunday there is no period of abstinence from food.

Q3: What is the wisdom behind eating vegetarian food only after the period of abstinence?

A3: The vegetarian food was the diet that God had prepared for Adam and Eve (**Gen 1:29**) they also continued to eat it even after the sin (**Gen 3:18**). God did not allow man to eat meat except after the flood (**Gen 9:3**) and when God saved the Israelites from the bondage of Pharaoh, He offered them the manna (**Num 11:7,8**) – He only gave them meat to eat after they murmured against Him (**Num 11:33**) and with meat He

struck them and killed many of them. – Thus we conclude that the vegetarian food was the original diet for humans and that it is recommended as a means of asceticism not because other foods are unclean but in order to discipline our bodies.

Q4: Why does the Church allow us to eat fish on certain fasts?

A4: Since the fasting periods are lengthy, the Church has decided to allow her children to eat fish to supplement their diet with a protein source [on certain fasts] if they elect to do so. – We notice that fish was the preferred meal for our Lord Jesus Christ during His Incarnation (**Jn 21:9**).

Q5: Is fasting part of the Christian worship or does it pertain only to the Old Testament?

A5: There are many biblical verses that proves that fasting is indeed expected from every Christian:

- Our Lord said, “...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.” (**Mt 6:18**) – Thus fasting is expected from Christians and there is also a heavenly reward if we fast according to God’s will.
- Our Lord said about His disciples and those who believe their teachings, “The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and **then they will fast.**” (**Mt 9:15**) – an indication that fasting is expected from Christians.
- Our Lord said, “This kind can come out by nothing except by prayer and fasting.” (**Mk 9:29**) – explicit message that without fasting we cannot overcome in our spiritual struggles.
- Our Lord Himself fasted 40 days and 40 nights (**Mt 4:2; Mk 1:12; Lk 4:1**).
- We also read about St. Paul saying “...in hunger and thirst, **in fastings often ...**” (**2 Cor 11:27**) – “in labors, in sleeplessness, **in fastings ...**” (**2 Cor 6:5**) and the rest of the apostles fasted as well (**Acts 14:23; 13:3**).
- St. Paul exhorts the married people “give yourselves **to fasting** and prayer” (**1 Cor 7:5**).

Protestants neglect fasting and do not encourage people to fast. They consider fasting a human work and since to them good works do not play any role in salvation; they have not emphasized the importance and the benefits of fasting. It is not uncommon to find people in their fifties or sixties who have not fasted a single day!

→ For questions about the spirituality of fasting consult ‘*The Spirituality of Fasting*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Comparative Theology*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.