

# Holy Fast

*This article is an abstract from the recently published book “Sojourners, Monastic Letters”,<sup>1</sup> by Father Matta El-Meskeen. Note: All quotations are taken from the New King James Version, if not otherwise mentioned.*

**B**ELOVED BROTHERS in the Lord Jesus,  
Grace to you and peace from God the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with Whom we have obtained reconciliation through the blood of His beloved Son. He has revealed to us the power of His love even though we are unworthy of such a thing, due to the many sins we have committed by neglecting repentance and scorning tears and beating our chest [...] A great part of Lent has passed, but I hope you have earned some of its vast and immeasurable blessings. Although I have written at length on fasting in *Orthodox Prayer Life*,<sup>2</sup> I still long to direct your holy and chaste souls towards spiritual matters of a different sort. They are on a level that is a bit higher due to the measure of grace that you have attained by practicing the works of the saints in this holy wilderness.

I wish to say about fasting that it is a life according to the Spirit. Those who have lived a life of fasting according to the Spirit know this quite well for they would have tasted “life and peace” according to the commandment of Paul, “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom 8:6).

As for how to taste that life or that peace, it is best not to ask me, for such matters are not perceptible to one’s mind as they essentially transcend mental perception. All we can derive from a commandment is to understand it in the first place then put it into action. As for its intrinsic truth, it turns within us into a spirit of bliss and happiness through which we can taste life, peace and all the fruit of the Spirit.

Every one who has weaned himself from the filth of the flesh and reined in the passions of his soul inwardly and outwardly can conduct himself according to the Spirit. Yet, those who still struggle against the flesh should not be too quick to ask for the resurrection, otherwise, they would be reproached by the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Father Matta El-Meskeen (Matthew the Poor), “Fasting,” in *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way*, (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 229-32.

angels and the spirits of the saints who have fulfilled all righteousness. Such persons should not be dejected but should instead rejoice in their lowly state. They should rather endeavor more earnestly to prepare themselves for crucifixion and burial. It is only then that they shall find happiness and joy. However, those who take my words lightly need much labor to gain what others have accomplished without labor.

Fasting signifies entry via the commandment into the sphere of loving obedience without complaint or unease for joyful obedience has its own crown. As for grumbling and forced obedience, they are the traits of slaves. They have no wages but are regarded as the payment of a debt that has to be paid.

Those who practice obedience for the sake of righteousness have already covered a great distance to set themselves free from the bondage of flesh as well as its passions which work in them through the power of sin.

Blessed is the one who fasts joyfully, for he or she has won hidden support from truth, "and the truth shall make you free" (Jn 8:32). The one who rejoices in the hardships of the flesh has begun to walk after the Spirit.

Open your heart's ear to heed the pleas of the Spirit when you are liberated from the passions of the flesh that defile the spiritual ear. Once you have gained such perception, open then your heart to see what you lack in order to enter into light. See what weapons you need to conquer the powers of darkness that are actively lurking in the flesh. Such times are exceedingly blessed, for in these moments we stand naked before the Truth. Although we do not see Him, it is in His light that we see our own defects. We see that we need to purge our senses in order to share the joy of those who stand there. Yet, if we still do not know what we must do to join the congregation of saints, it is clear that we need much weeping and contrition of heart, for this means that we are still waiting at the gate, uncertain whether it will be opened before us or not. We can draw great comfort merely from Christ's fast in the wilderness for forty days during Lent. In this way, we present our fasting to the Father perfectly fulfilled in Christ. What we have been unable to do before through fasting, due to the frailty of flesh in the face of God's commandments, through Christ's fasting has now become a dynamic spiritual power that can change our lives. This power can cleanse the filth of the flesh and tame its savage passions. It prepares the old man for total crucifixion with Him who was crucified on Calvary. In this way, we may obtain complete release from the power of sin and the death inherent in it. "O Death, where is your sting?" (1Cor 15:55). Yea, O sin, where is your power? It is as such that we cry out in our fasting, to draw heavily upon the divine power of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has supported our flesh with His own flesh and fulfilled our fasting by His own fasting.

Beloved ones, prepare yourselves for we are approaching the Cross. Prepare your souls and be ready to curb the power of sin. Have enough courage to crucify the old flesh completely and utterly even to death upon a cross. It is then that the flesh will no longer reign over us in any way. You are not unaware, I am sure, of the power of the flesh. I do not mean simply holding sway over the lust for eating, drinking or fornication, but also to dominate the sins that pollute the spiritual life like envy, rancor, hatred, judgment, ostentation, the love of fame and conquering others, for example.

Yes! Prepare for crucifixion and be ready to give up the flesh without reservation. Ignore all its demands and cries. Put to death all that is earthly in it—even unto complete and utter death. The measure for such a goal is this, those who have died neither rejoice nor mourn for any earthly or fleshly thing. Any feeling of joy or grief whose basis is dust reveals that the old flesh is still alive. “For he who has died has been freed from sin”(Rom 6:7). Blessed indeed and truthful and just are these words of Paul who saw the Lord with his brilliant mind and beheld the glory of the heavens in the spirit!

We are approaching the Cross, so be courageous and undaunted. Press forward bravely and set your souls free, which have been enslaved to the vanities of the flesh. Tear down the veil and enter the temple that you may live. All those who manage to mortify the old flesh will instead have a spiritual, living body. Rather than being an enemy that enslaves us under the law of sin dwelling in its members, the flesh will be transformed into a stick upon which the new man leans. It can even serve as fuel to set a living sacrifice ablaze for all eternity.

Fear not! He who once held us captive is now dead. Yes, the flesh died when Christ died. Sin no longer has any dominion over us unless we willfully let it reign within our mortal bodies, thus obeying passions. We have been granted the license of freedom. It now remains for us to take advantage of that freedom if we wish to become free. Sin now lies dead, for it has lost its previous power to reign in the death under which we had once been held captive. Nevertheless, if we now allow it to reign once again in our mortal bodies, we shall forfeit the sway we have been allowed to gain over it. It will work once again to bear fruit for death. For the mind that is focused on the flesh is hostile to God. Why? Because it is not subject to the law of God.

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