

Jonah's Fast

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The Fast of the people of Nineveh or the Fast of Jonah, is practiced by the Coptic Orthodox Church for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, two weeks before the start of the Great Lent.

Of course, this matter is well known. For many years, the church has completed this fast. So many people having offered up their repentance to God, with fasting and prayer. And it is, to put it briefly, this small book in the Holy Bible, a story of reconciliation with God. For sins corrupt the relationship with God.

God, in His promises, in His compassion and in His great mercy, is always the same and unchanging.

A person may change. When he corrupts his/her ways and falls into evil and disobedience, breaking the commandments, the relationship with God becomes as though there is a cutting off that is felt by a person. Any one of us knows this. I mean, as soon as we begin to mess up, we feel inside of ourselves that this reconciliation with God is not present and that there is no fellowship between us and God.

It is in our best interest, for all of us; that there be peace between us and God. Because where could we possibly hide from God. If we continues in this state that we are in, where will we go? Of course, Jonah himself is a good example of this. Interestingly, he wanted to hide from God, to run from him. Where could he go?

Just as it was written; "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. (Psalm 137:7-10).

So where shall we go if we wish to escape from God? Because when we fall into sins there exists between us and God a separation. So there is no other way for us other than to reunite with God. There isn't... there is no other way. When we say in the Holy Liturgy, "There is no other like you". We have no other.

One of the best things for us is not to delay our reconciliation with God. Of course, we in the New Testament have been reconciled to the Father by Jesus Christ. This is a matter that one needs to confirm within oneself; that Christ to Him be all glory, reconciled us with the Father in the flesh of His humanity. And He united us with Him when His divinity was united with our humanity. He said that we should strive as ambassadors, we Christians, I mean, as ambassadors who say to the people, "make peace with God".

So our mission as Christians is to evangelise for this reconciliation. To tell people “Go make peace with God, brothers and sisters”. Do not delay this matter because, as a consequence of sins, the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience (Col 3:6)

It is known that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), so there is no reason that should make us delay our repentance. The devil, with all his schemes and wiles, wishes that we would perish, so what he does is to encourage this delay. And when we delay, time is never working in our favour. Because we do not know when one will leave this world, when our lives will end and when our days will be complete. No one knows.

The devil has always been this way with our Fathers, the saints, through the experience of thousands of years in the church history. He would tell them, “repent tomorrow” and the Fathers with their beautiful insight would say “I will repent today and whatever happens tomorrow will happen”. And he would try to overwhelm them with the breadth of hope in the world but they were very very aware. One said to a father who struggled much, “man, why are you taking things so seriously? There are so many years ahead, perhaps 50 years or so. Just take it easy.” The father replied “just 50 years left? you’re scaring me, I will never make it, I need to increase the measure of my struggle and then repent”.

The procrastination of time is in vain when we believe that we are in good health or that the world will remain as it is. It is not guaranteed. So it is in our best interest to repent, when? Today!

Jonah called out in the Old Testament with great outcry regarding the wrath and overthrowing of the city and the wages of their sins. So the outcry was intended to admonish, and the people feared greatly. The wrath of God came down on them from heaven, so they repented and cried out to God and sat in ashes. They wore the sackcloth of mourning and fasted. They called for fasting and lifted their voices to God and they turned back from their sins and from the wickedness of their hands. One, two, then three days and the Lord lifted his wrath from them.

What about the outcry given to us today? Does it hold the same retribution? No. The Bible calls us saying “ Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 4:17) It’s not about repenting out of the fear of God’s wrath or that He would allow me to perish. No! But I am repentant like a son who left home, and out of regret returned to his father.

These are completely different concepts. So the fast and the submission before God and the prostrations (metanoia)... what is its purpose? I am telling Him, “I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:18), and He tells me, “No, you are my son!”

Repentance in our lives as Christians is completely different. The return of the son/ daughter who left his/her father’s embrace and regrets the life he/she is living and the state that he/she has reached of poverty, of degradation, of hunger. To the point

that even the food of the swine, he/she could not find. So he/she says “I will arise and go to my father”.

It's different. It doesn't have even a hint of threatening, but rather it's full of mercy, it's full of love. One remembers what honour he/she was living in and returns to make peace with whom? With his/her father. And how easy it is for the son/daughter to make peace with his/her father. Not because of the son/daughter but because of the father.

Why? Because our Father is the lover of mankind, perfectly affectionate and he says “the one who comes to me, I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37) . No one that comes to me will be rejected. And that's why I say, our hope is that we would find favour with God and our hope will never be put to shame no matter the sins.

Our sins, he says, are just external, but internally we are the children of God. Do not let the sin take hold of you. Do not let the sin return you to bondage. We have the glorious liberty of the children of God. We were born and He says, “if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed”. (John 8:36).

Sin is bondage, and he/she who commits sin is a slave. The Lord said so. Please do not differentiate between sins, heavy sins and light sins. Sin is sin, and it is destructive. Sin is against the divine nature ... any sin. We take it lightly of sins for which we cannot see the destructive consequence.

For example, one who lies ... well he/she is the same. He/she lies, lies and lies, but yet he/she looks the same, his/her place, his/her life, his/her relationships...it doesn't show. A person may fear sins that can affect his/her body, and he/she can ignore matters like lying, deceit, swearing or idle talk. It's not apparent or obvious . Sin is sin ... there is no big and little sin. “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” James 2:10

One must take a clear stance against sin, any sin. Do not underestimate sin, those that are called minor sins. It is destructive. It's just like a poison, whether small or large amounts, the same poison is fatal.

But reconciliation with the Father, which truly we have all experienced, those times when one returns to God, kneeling, throwing himself to the ground, and saying “Father, I have sinned against you”. We would feel that God is embracing us. And that the kisses of the Father encapsulate us, and we feel we have returned to our original state, and standing to pray, we feel it.

There has not been a time when we have returned to Him and He has said “No, your sins have been one too many or too awful. You have returned many times and promised hundreds of times, saying you have repented and you have returned to sin again. No, no, no. I will not accept you”.

No! That's not the nature of Christ, nor the nature of the Father. Never. That's why I say, be encouraged. Let us be encouraged to live the life of repentance and

returning to God daily. Why? Because I sin daily. We need to live every moment in the bosom of the Father. Any distance in any way is destructive to the soul.

Take pleasure in a life in Christ in the bosom of the Father. Pleasure, joy, peace, delight, sufficiency.

And without Him is the opposite. Without Him we fall into sin and begin to hate ourselves, feeling the darkness inside ourselves. Feeling that he is far from God, although God is never far from us.

That's why I say, this fast, may the Lord accept our daily return to Him and to bless the oaths that we offer up unto Him and to bless our lives in all things, great and small.

To God be the glory forever more. Amen