

# Degrees of Fasting

Fasting involves both the body and the soul because the human person consists of both body and soul. “The bodily fast is when the belly abstains from food and drink. The fast of the soul is when it refrains from evil thoughts, deeds, and words...The bodily fast is beneficial for us since it serves for the mortification of our passions. But fasting of the soul is absolutely essential because without it, bodily fasting is nothing” (St. Tikhon of Zadonsk).

## I. FASTING OF THE SOUL

### A. ABSTAINING FROM EVIL THOUGHTS

1. **DETACHING FROM EVIL MEMORIES:** not arrogantly insisting on one’s own reason or worldview; not remembering wrongs or holding grudges; not refusing to forgive; or clinging to profane and passionate images and impressions of people or places;
2. **DETACHING FROM EVIL SENSE IMPRESSIONS:** abstaining from perverse or pointless entertainments which provoke the passions, such as movies, popular music, sporting events, social and mass media, and restaurants; modesty in dress, gestures, and language (control of the tongue abstaining from vulgar and profane speech).

**B. ABSTAINING FROM EVIL FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS:** anger, hatred, self-gratification, obsession, addiction, self-will, apathy, and lack of compassion.

**C. ABSTAINING FROM EVIL DESIRES:** self-justification, greed, discontent, self-love, curiosity without purpose or consequence (experimentation), carnal pleasure, and debauchery.

## II. FASTING OF THE BODY

**A. COMPLETE ABSTINENCE** of all food and drink for a day or short span of days

1. *Before receiving Holy Communion at the Divine Liturgy:* from midnight on before morning Liturgies, or from noon on before evening Liturgies;
2. *Wednesdays and Fridays* (except the 4 fast-free weeks of the year: from Dec.. 25 to Jan. 5; the 1<sup>st</sup> week of Pre-Lent; Bright Week after Pascha; and the week after Pentecost);
3. *Four fixed days of the year:* Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (Sept. 14); the eves of Christmas and Theophany (Dec. 24 & Jan. 5); and the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (Aug. 29).

## Orthodox Christian Fasting

### B. ABSTINENCE FROM CERTAIN TYPES OF FOOD AND DRINK FOR A SEASON (meats and meat products, dairy [cheese, milk, and eggs], wine and alcoholic drinks, and cooking with olive oil)

1. *Advent* (the Nativity Fast) – November 15 to December 24;
2. *Lent* (the 10 week-long season before Pascha)
  - a. The third week of Pre-Lent called *meatfare*, abstaining from meats but not dairy;
  - b. The 40 days of Great Lent beginning the day after *cheesefare*, abstaining also from dairy products;
  - c. Holy Week, the week after Great Lent immediately prior to the Feast of Pascha.
3. *The Apostles Fast* – 8 days after Pentecost to June 29 (the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul);
4. *The Dormition Fast* – August 1 to 14 (concluding with the Feast of the Dormition [lit., *falling-asleep*] of the Theotokos on August 15).

### III. DEGREES OF FASTING

#### A. THE DEGREE TO WHICH ONE ABSTAINS FROM SIN is the ultimate goal of fasting, accompanied by repentance, faith, and love:

1. *Confession of and mourning for sin*;
2. *Humility*;
3. *Prayer, both personal and liturgical* (services in the Church);
4. *Learning God's Word to keep His commandments* (obedience);
5. *Works of mercy in love of one's neighbor*.

#### B. FASTING BODILY AS STRICTLY AS POSSIBLE controlling both the kinds and amount of food and drink consumed (not exceeding satisfaction).

#### C. RELAXING OR MODIFYING KINDS OF FOODS AND DRINK DEPENDING ON ONE'S PHYSICAL AND/OR SPIRITUAL CONDITION:

1. Pregnant mothers, infants, and small children;
2. Persons who are ill or suffering from debilitating medical conditions;
3. Persons taking certain medications to be taken with food, or who have certain nutritional requirements because of their medical condition;
4. When keeping the fasting rule becomes prideful and legalistic rather than a discipline of thanksgiving to God.

## Lenten (Fasting) Foods

These foods ensure good nutrition:

1. **Protein: cooked pulses/legumes (lentils, peas, beans, and traditional, non-isolated soy protein soybean foods such as tofu and tempeh)**
2. **Protein, vitamins, and minerals (cooked vegetables):**
  - a. **Unground chia seeds;**
  - b. **Firm, extra-firm, or super-firm tofu;**
  - c. **Turnip greens;**
  - d. **Bok choy;**
  - e. **Mustard greens;**
  - f. **Kale;**
  - g. **Rutabaga;**
  - h. **Broccoli**
  - i. **Watercress;**
  - j. **Kohlrabi**
3. **At least one cup of cooked fresh or frozen dark green vegetables per day: broccoli, kale, spinach, grape leaves, mustard greens, etc. (but not lettuces or green peppers).**
4. **Carbohydrates: a mix of foods for caloric needs, e.g., tubers (potatoes, yams, sweet potatoes, cassava, or taro), whole grains, nuts, seeds, and other fruits and vegetables not listed above**
5. **Whenever possible, consume soaked, soured, fermented, or sprouted versions of pulses/legumes, whole grains, nuts, and seeds.**
6. **Foods or supplements that aid digestion at every meal (gut biome):**
  - a. **ginger (cooked with food, or juiced raw);**
  - b. **lacto-fermented vegetables (e.g., dill pickles, kimchi, and real sauerkraut);**
  - c. **kombucha;**
  - d. **raw apple cider vinegar;**
  - e. **enzyme supplement containing alpha-galactosidase.**
7. **Restrict alcohol, processed oils, sweets, and desserts:**
  - a. **Limit sweets and desserts to five or ten percent of your food intake.**
  - b. **Natural oils (fats): coconut, olive, macadamia, and avocado.**
8. **Natto: fermented soy bean.**
9. **Orange and red vegetables: squash, sweet potatoes, carrots, etc.; tomatoes, red peppers, red leaf lettuce, etc.**

## Orthodox Christian Fasting

### 10. Nutritional supplements:

- a. Wheat germ;
- b. Beets (cooked or canned, a lesser quantity if raw or juiced);
- d. 2-3 tablespoons of sunflower or soy lecithin.

### 11. Two capsules of krill oil per day. [Other supplements like a multi-vitamin, or B12: consumption of shellfish, e.g., oysters (zinc) or clams (vitamin B12), once a week is common because these nutrients are difficult to get in necessary amounts from plants alone.]

See “How to Eat Well During an Orthodox Lent,” by Chris Masterjohn, PhD, at <https://chrismasterjohnphd.com/blog/2018/09/15/eat-well-orthodox-lent>

### Key Principles of an Optimum Fasting Diet:

1. While restricting the *kinds of foods* eaten during the Lenten Fast, e.g., meats and dairy (animal products) and alcohol, remember that fasting is not so much a treatment for illness, but a treatment for wellness. Fasting is an act of turning away from temptation and back toward God.
2. A variety of foods are available during the Lenten Fast, so take time to enjoy the foods God provides, especially by shopping for and preparing the ingredients for yourself and your family.
3. Prepare and eat foods recognizable in their natural, whole state as something that was alive or has come out of the ground.
4. Avoid added sugars, processed and refined foods (e.g., bread, cereals, potato chips, pastries, etc.), and seed oils (e.g., canola, sunflower, corn, etc.).
5. Eat a diet high in natural fats, low in carbohydrates, and moderate in protein.
6. During the Lenten Fast, maintain the practice of intermittent fasting, that is, continue to fast completely from food one or two days of the week (Wednesdays and Fridays) and before receiving Holy Communion (Saturday and Sunday mornings).
7. Because fasting is a treatment for wellness and not a legalistic system of punishment and reward, add some dairy or meat protein to your diet *according to bodily need*, yet do so in moderation.
8. Fast according to your ability avoiding either extreme of strictness leading to pride, or relaxation leading to self-gratification.
9. Transform hunger for food with satisfying greater spiritual needs: prayer, meditation on God’s Word, participating in services of the Church, engaging in creative hobbies, time in sunshine and nature, gardening, physical exercise, and meaningful social contact.
10. Fast with your soul from indiscriminate sensory input: social media, godless entertainments, gossip, etc.

See *The Complete Guide to Fasting*, by Jason Fung, MD, (Canada: Victory Belt Publishing, Inc., 2016)

# Fasting in the Scriptures and Fathers

1. The most basic type of fasting is to *abstain completely* from food and drink for a day or span of days:

- **Moses on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights** - Ex. 34:28
- **Elijah on his 40 day journey to Mount Horeb** - 3 Kgm. 19:8
- **The Jewish Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)** – Lev. 23:26-32; Acts 27:9
- **The Ninevite fast included also their livestock** – Jonah 3:7
- **Esther’s three-day fast** – Est. 4:16
- **Four fast days of national remembrance** – Zech. 7:5; 8:19 (see Jer. 46:2; 52:10-11; 48:1-3; and 52:2, respectively)
- **Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and nights** - Matt. 4:2
- **Two days per week: Monday and Thursday** (Jewish practice; cf. Lk. 18:12)

2. The second type of fasting is to *abstain from certain kinds* of food and drink for a length of days or a season:

- **Adam and Eve were given plants to eat and prohibited from eating of the one tree of the knowledge of good and evil** – Gen. 1:29; 2:16-17
- **After the Flood, animal flesh was permitted by God as food, but not blood** – Gen. 9:3-4; Lev. 17:13-14
- **Israelites, people of the Covenant with God, were prohibited from eating animals defined as “unclean” in the Law** – Lev. 11 (cf. Acts 10:14)
- **During their 40-year journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, the Israelites were given *manna* by God as their daily provision** – Ex. 16:14-16, 31-35
- **The Nazarite vow of purity included abstinence from wine, intoxicating drink, and any product of the grapevine** – Num. 6:3-4; Judg. 13:4, 7 [Samson]; Jer. 42 [Rechabites]; Luke 1:15 [John the Baptist]
- **Daniel and his companions abstained from the rich Babylonian food and wine for 10 days eating only vegetables and drinking only water** – Dan. 1:8-15
- **The Apostle Paul was willing to abstain from meat permanently** – 1 Cor. 8:13

3. **Original Christian fasting practice was threefold: the first part of the day beginning in the evening until receiving Holy Communion the following morning; throughout the day on Wednesdays and Fridays; and for a period of time variously practiced in different local churches prior to the Paschal Feast.**

- **Before Communion:** Acts 13:2-3; *Carthage*, 48; *Quinisext*, 29
- **Wednesdays and Fridays:** *Didache*, 7.4-8.1; *Apostolic Canons*, 69
- **Prior to Pascha:** 1) 40 hours (Eusebius Pamphilius, *Church History* 5.23-24); 2) 1 week/Holy Week (*Apostolic Constitutions* 5.18); 3) from 3 weeks, to 40 days, to 7-8 weeks/Lent (*Apostolic Canons*, 69; *Laodicea*, 50; Socrates Scholasticus, *Church History* 5.22)

## Orthodox Christian Fasting

4. **Based on the standard of the pre-Paschal Fast, the entire Church year came to include 4 fasting seasons of varying length: Lent (lit., *spring*); the Apostles' Fast (*summer*); the Dormition Fast (*autumn*); and the Nativity Fast, or Advent (*winter*).**
  - “[T]he fasts of the Church...are so distributed over the whole year that the law of abstinence may be kept before us at all times. Accordingly we keep the spring fast in Lent, the summer fast at Pentecost, the autumn fast in the seventh month (September), and the winter fast in this which is the tenth month (December), knowing that there is nothing unconnected with the divine commands, and that all the elements serve the Word of God to our instruction, so that from the very hinges on which the world turns, as if by four gospels we learn unceasingly what to preach and what to do.” (St. Leo the Great [mid-5<sup>th</sup> c.], *Sermon* 19.2, “On the Fast in the Tenth Month”)
  
5. **The purpose of fasting is the humbling of one’s body and soul in repentance, that is, the turning from oneself to the love of God and neighbor in Christ. Alternately, the purpose of feasting is thanksgiving (Gk., *eucharist*) to God in Christ with the faithful.**
  - “For any soul who is not humbled on that same day shall be utterly destroyed from among his people.” (Lev. 23:29)
  - “Now says the Lord your God, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is long-suffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils. Who know if He will return and change His mind – if He will leave and blessing behind Him, even an offering and drink-offering to the Lord our God?’” (Joel 2:12-14)
  - “‘If you fast for condemnations and quarrels, and strike a humble man with your fists, why do you fast to Me as you do today, so your voice may be heard in crying? I did not choose this fast, and such a day for a man to humble his soul...rather, loose every bond of wrong-doing; untie the knots of violent dealings; cancel the debts of the oppressed; and tear apart every unjust contract. Break your bread for the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. If you see a naked man, clothe him, not shall you disregard your offspring in your own household.’” (Isa. 58:4-5, 6-7)
  - “Then I set my face toward the Lord God to seek Him in prayer and supplication, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.” (Dan. 9:3)
  - “And Jesus said to [the disciples of John the Baptist], ‘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.’” (Matt. 9:15)
  - Jesus is the Bridegroom, and His kingdom is the marriage feast manifested at the Divine Liturgy of Holy Communion, the Eucharist (see Matt. 22:2; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:9). Thus periods of fasting conclude with the presence of the Bridegroom at the Divine Liturgy of various feasts, sometimes followed by *fast-free weeks* of rejoicing, e.g., after Pascha, Pentecost, and Nativity (Christmas).