

The Spiritual Journey from Egypt to the Promised Land

At this time we all look forward to completing the fast of Great Lent, the services of Holy Week and celebrating the Bright Resurrection of Christ—the Feast of Feasts: Pascha! The Feast of Passover or *Pesach* as it's called in Hebrew, and *Pascha* in Greek, signifies the “crossing-over” from the worldly life to the spiritual life. Just as the people of Israel were led out of the bondage of Egypt and followed Moses in the wilderness for 40 years on their journey to the Promised Land, so the 40-day fast of Great Lent is intended to be for us a means of spiritual purification and renewal to prepare us to enter more deeply into that spiritual promised land on the Feast of Pascha.

Many Holy Fathers have seen in Moses, a prefiguring of Christ. Moses gave the Commandments of the Law to the chosen people of Israel and Christ fulfilled that Law and calls us to an even higher standard of spiritual life to repent of our sins, forgive one another and love one another. Moses fasted for 40 days on Mt. Sinai and renewed the covenant of the Law; Christ fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, overcame the temptations and began His saving ministry for us all.

Archbishop Andrew Rymarenko once referred to the fast of Great Lent as a kind of “spiritual academy which will reveal to us the laws of life and the laws of our heart which we need so much.” When one is a student and attending school, in order to learn the lessons properly and pass the tests, we must attend the classes, pay attention and study the textbooks. So it is with the spiritual academy of Lent. In order to derive the spiritual benefit that we very much need, it is not enough to simply avoid meat and dairy products alone. There are those who do not even believe in God and yet observe a vegan diet for health reasons or because they are animal rights advocates.

In the Gospel of Matthew 5:20 the Lord said, “*For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*” This was because the scribes and Pharisees fulfilled only the external, moral aspects of the commandments, but neglected the spiritual practice and understanding of them. This is why during Great Lent, we must make an effort to attend as many of the church services as possible, pay attention to all that is given us—the prayers and readings, and take time to study the Scriptures and writings of our Holy Fathers. This is why the book “The Ladder of Divine Ascent” by St. John Climacus is appointed to be read each year during Great Lent.

We're all familiar with recordings of 'the greatest hits' of some popular band or even classical composers. Great Lent, in a sense, could really be considered 'the greatest hits' of the spiritual life! The Sundays before Lent remind us to repent of our sins: Zaccheus the tax collector who repented by giving away all his wealth to those he had wronged and to the poor; the Publican and the Pharisee who demonstrated how we must not be proud in our outward accomplishments, but that within our hearts, we must be humble and confess our sins before God if we wish to be justified; the Prodigal Son, who having acknowledged his sinfulness makes up his mind to return to his Father in repentance; the Sunday of the Last Judgment (Forgiveness Sunday) that admonishes us with a vision of the dread Day of Judgment that we will each encounter, but also teaching us to forgive one another so that God will forgive us.

Then, the Sundays of Lent teach us about the Triumph of Orthodoxy and the proper veneration of Holy Icons; St. Gregory Palamas who confirmed the importance and practice of spiritual prayer; Adoration of the Cross in which we see how we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ; St. John Climacus and the Ladder of Divine Ascent which teaches us how to struggle against the passions and sins with God's help and to acquire the virtues; and St. Mary of Egypt who gave us great consolation by showing us that no matter how great our sins and weakness are, if we do all we can to repent, there is nothing that God cannot forgive.

We have been given this opportunity of spiritual renewal and our Holy Church calls us to do all we can to take advantage of this opportunity. Our merciful God knows how weak and sinful we are, and yet He calls us to make the effort to be obedient to His commandments. Let us fulfill our duty to keep the fast, come to as many of the Church services as possible and pray at home as well, do good deeds, come to Holy Confession and receive absolution for our sins, participate in Holy Communion and forgive and love one another. Then Pascha will be for us a true crossing over to the blessings of the spiritual Promised Land! May God bless you always!

+Fr. Gregory