

THE ORDER OF FASTS IN ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHIDO CHURCH (ሥርዓተ ጾም ዘኣርቶዶክስ ተዋህዶ)

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Fasting is abstinence from all things a body needs, and one has to fast from animal products and from any kind of food for a limited time until the period of fasting is over. (Fetha Negest 15, Mt. 6:16). In general, one has to abstain from any thing which the body desires.

The aim of fasting is to make the desire of the body to obey the will of the soul, to seek forgiveness of guilt and to increase the reward of the soul.

Fasting has perpetual relation with religion. Even though the way it is practiced differs from religion to religion, anyone who has religion practices fast. Especially in the Old Testament, fasting had a prominent place in the lives of the Jewish people. Whenever the Old Testament prophets sought to communicate with God, they neither ate food nor drank water. (Ex. 34:28). The wrath of God that comes about as a result of sin can be averted through solemn prayer and rigorous fasting. (Jon. 3:7-10; Joel 2:15).

In the New Testament also, fasting is not a law made by man. It is our Savior Jesus Christ himself who made it the beginning of His messianic ministry in his earthly life. (Mt. 4:2; Lk. 4:2). Our Savior Jesus Christ has taught that fasting has the power of driving away evil spirits. (Mt. 17:21; Mk. 9:2).

The Apostles who were commanded to serve the church received guidance from the Holy Spirit while they were praying and fasting. (Acts 13:2). Priests and deacons who served as preachers of the gospel were inspired and ordained while fasting and praying. (Acts 13:3; 14:23).

It was through fasting and beseeching God that righteous people received what they needed and wished. (Ezra. 8:21; Ne. 9:1-3; Est. 4:16-17; Acts 10:30; 13:2-3).

As the theological interpretation of fast is beseeching God and asking him for the forgiveness of sin, it is therefore, mandatory to abstain from animal products and alcoholic drinks which incite lust. (Dan. 10:2-3). Fasting has been taught and practiced in the teachings of the apostles and Church Fathers. (The Law of Kings Art. 15; Didas. 29).

As it is said, "Blessed is he who fasts to feed the poor", if any fasting man gives what he has allocated for his lunch and supper to the organization of the disabled founded by the Church or to the poor, his fast will be more complete. (Isa. 58:6-11).

Fasting is not only abstinence from food. It will be a true fast if the eye is kept from seeing, the mouth from speaking and the ear from hearing evil things. (Mt. 5:21-30; St. Yared-Digua).

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has its own laws and orders of fasting. Accordingly, there are seven fasting periods.

1. **The Great Fast (Lent)..... ዐቢይ ጸም**
2. **Wednesday and Fridays..... የረቡዕ እና ዓርብ ጸም**
3. **Nineveh..... ጸም ነነዌ**
4. **Gehad (the eves of Christmas and Epiphany).... ጸም ጉዳድ**
5. **The fast of the prophets or advent..... ጸም ነቢያት**
6. **The fast of the Apostles ጸም ሐዋርያት**
7. **The fast of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Mary.ጸም ፍልሲታ ለማርያም**

A. Lent or the Great Fast(ዐቢይ ጸም)

May the Lord be praised; this is the fast that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ fasted for forty days and nights after his baptism. (Mt. 4:1). The church observes this fast following the example of our Lord.

The Great Fast has 8 weeks which consist of 55 days. The first week is known as the fast of Eraclius, the Byzantine Emperor who lived in 614 A.D. This fast is dedicated to Eraclius for the following reasons.

During his reign the Persians invaded Jerusalem and took the Cross of the Lord. Eraclius made an expedition to Persia and having defeated the Persians he took the Cross back to Jerusalem. The Christians in Jerusalem who were very happy because of Eraclius's victory and the return of the Cross, dedicated the first week before Lent to be the fast of Eraclius and included it in their canons. Thus our Church has accepted and included it in her canon to be a part of Lent. (Fitha Negest Art. 15).

The last week of Lent is called Passion Week (ስሙኑ ህማማት) during which the Apostles fasted in commemoration of Christ's Passion. This is also regarded as part of the Great Fast.

Thus Lent is called great because firstly, it is the Lord's fast. Secondly, through this fast Satan's temptation (love of money, greediness and arrogance) are overcome.

All Christians, young and old have to observe the fast of the Lord. St. Yared, the Ethiopian hymnologist who wrote the hymn of our church has composed in his hymn book known as "Tsome Digua" (Hymn of Fast) songs for each Sunday of the Great Fast. So each Sunday during the Great Fast is named after the song of that Sunday.

The first Sunday of the Great Fast is known as the **"Zewerede=ዘወረደ"** ("Zewerede" means the one who descended from above). In the beginning of his hymn book, Tsome Digua, St. Yared mentions the descent, incarnation and crucifixion of the Lord. (Jn. 3:13).

The second Sunday is called **"Kidist=ቅዱስ"**. Kidist means holy. It tells the holiness of Sunday.

We call the third Sunday **"Mikurab=ጠቅላላ"**. The word Mikurab stands for the synagogue. It reminds us that our Lord during his ministry taught in the synagogue.

The fourth Sunday is known as **"Mesague=መግባዕ"** Mesague means one who is infirm. (Jn. 5:1-9). A hymn for the healing of the sick and giving sight to the blind by the Lord is sung on this day.

The fifth Sunday is called **"Debre Zeit=ደብረ ዘይት"**. Debre Zeit is the Geez word for Mount of Olives. A hymn of our Lord's second coming which he taught on Mount Olives is sung on this day.

We call the sixth Sunday "**Gebra Her=ገረጌር**" "Good Servant". The story of the good servant who received five talents and made a profit of five more talents is told and sung on this day. (Mt. 25:14-30).

The seventh Sunday is called "**Nicodimus=ነቆዲሞስ**". A hymn commemorating the coming of Nicodimus to our Lord during the night is sung.

The eighth Sunday is "**Hosaena=ሆሳና**" Palm Sunday. It is a commemorative day on which our Lord entered into the temple in triumph and during which the people sung "Hosanna in the highest". The week from the eve of Palm Sunday to Easter is known as **Semune Himamat=ሰሙን ሆሞማት** - Passion Week. On these days, varieties of food are not eaten. Adoration is given to God. A book known as "Gibrehimamat" composed of different passages taken from the Scriptures and other religious books dealing with the passion and death of our Lord is read.

The altar is covered with a black cloth in remembrance of the dark centuries during which Adam was alienated from his Crator. The priests wear black vestments. As this week is a time of commemorating of the suffering and damnation of 5500 years, prayer for the dead and that of intercession are not said. Such prayers are said only on Palm Sunday.

Misete hamus ምሴተ ሐሙስ -Maundy Thursday

It is a day on which the Lord Jesus in absolute humility washed His Disciples's feet, ate the Last Supper with them and revealed the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. On this day the Liturgy is celebrated. Before the Liturgy, the priest brings water in a basin and saying the prayer of thanksgiving, washes the feet of the faithful. When the Liturgy is over, the faithful leave for home after benediction.

On the morrow of Thursday, i.e. Good Friday, in remembrance of Chris's crucifixion an Epitaphion (crucifix) is made and passages from the Scriptures and other religious books are read. The faithful prostrate every now and then. Good Friday is sometimes called a day of prostration. Towards the evening (at about 4:30 p.m.), the faithful approach a priest to be patted with small branches of olive trees. Patting the faithful in this way symbolizes the whipping of our Lord. Then the faithful say "God have mercy upon us" 400 times.

After hymns are sung and readings assigned for the day are read, the song, "Let us praise the Lord" is sung. With the exception of kissing of the cross, sinners confess their sins and after that absolution is said. Next prayer of intercession is conducted and the people are dismissed at 6 p.m. (Fetha Negest Art. 15 No. 601).

The Apostles did not eat and drink until they knew of the resurrection of the Lord. In accordance with this practice, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians who have the strength to abstain from every kind of food for two days can fast on both Friday and Saturday. But those who have not the strength fast on Saturday only. (Lk. 5:5-35; Fetha Negest Art. 15 No. 578).

On Saturday morning, the laity and the clergy gather in the church. After the appropriate morning prayer is over, the clergy singing the song "Christ made reconciliation by his crucifixion" give sedge to the people assembled, as a symbol of good tidings. The faithful tie the sedge round their heads.

The clergy wearing their vestments, holding a cross and ringing a bell go to the houses of the people who did not come to the Church and give them the sedge as a symbol of good news.

As the former Sabbath was the day on which God rested from His work after creating all creatures, this Sabbath is the day which Christ passed lying in the grave after completing his messianic ministry in three years and three months.

This day is called **“Kidame Se’ur ቀዳሚት ስዑር”** (unobserved) Saturday. It is called so because once a year it becomes a fast day. It is also called Green Saturday for on this day the sedge is given out.

The fact that the sedge is the symbol of good news is related to Biblical history. As the Bible tells us, when the earth was covered with the water of destruction and Noah’s Ark was floating on the flood; to see if the flood had subsided Noah opened the window of the ark and sent forth a dove. The dove returned with an olive leaf and knowing that the water had abated Noah became happy and began to rest his ark.

As the leaf of the olive tree served as the sign of congratulation at the time of Noah, by the death of Christ, the water of destruction, sin and the punishment of soul is removed from mankind. (1Pet. 3:19-21). The Church, therefore, heralds the good news to the faithful by presenting sedge.

B. Next to the Great Fast is the Fast of Wednesdays and Fridays (የረቡዕ እና ዓርብ ጸም)

Every week Wednesdays and Fridays are observed as fast days except during the fifty days (between Easter and Pentecost), and on the days of Christmas and Epiphany, when these festivals fall on these days.

The reason why Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days is as follows.

Wednesday

It is a day on which the Jewish Council made a consultation to crucify the Lord on Friday. (Jn. 11:46-53). Instruction is given that Christians should fast on this day always remembering the sentence of death made against Christ, the Savior of the World, who died for the sake of mankind.

Friday

As is well known, Friday is a blessed day on which the Lord is crucified in his flesh and the hope of redemption which was expected for a long time was fulfilled. (Jn. 19:17-30; Lk, 23:26-49). Thus it is canonized that except during the fifty days after Easter and during the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany when these festivals fall on these days, Wednesdays and Fridays should be observed every week in fasting and prayer. (The Law of Kings article 15; Didas. 29).

C. The Fast of Nineveh (ጸመ ነነዌ)

This is a three days fast, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. It falls at one time in January and at another in February. Thus it is one of the rotating fasts.

The reason behind the decision of our Church Fathers, that this fast be observed is that as the people of Nineveh were saved from the wrath of God through prayer and fasting, so also the faithful will receive mercy and blessings through this fast. (Jon. 3:5-9; Mt. 12:39).

D. Gehad (ጸመ ገህድ)

This fast is observed on the eves of Christmas and Epiphany. On Christmas and Epiphany, the Holy Liturgy is celebrated starting at midnight until 3:00 a.m. In the morning people eat meat, milk products and so on even if the days are Wednesdays or Fridays. So if Christmas and Epiphany fall on Wednesday and Friday, Tuesday and Thursday will be fast days. These fast days are known as Gehad.

E. Fast of the Prophets (Advent) (ጸመ ነቢያት)

It starts on November (Hidar ህዳር) 15 and extends to December (Tahisas ታህሳስ) 28. We observe this fast following the examples of the prophets who were fasting and praying in their times longing for the Advent of Christ. In the Law of Kings Article 15, instruction is given that we should observe this fast before we celebrate Christmas.

F. The Fast of the Apostles (ጸመ ሐዋርያት)

The Apostles observed this fast after they received the Holy Spirit and before they set out to proclaim the Gospel. The Church has laid down a rule for the faithful to observe this fast starting from the day immediately after White Sunday. Because of the fact that the fast of the Apostles comes after fifty days from Easter, it sometimes goes beyond forty days and sometimes falls short of thirty days.

G. The Fast of Assumption of the Virgin Mary (ጸመ ፍልሰታ ለማርያም)

The fast lasts from Nehassie ስህሴ (August) 1 to 15. Our Lady departed on 21 of Ter ጥር (January) in 50 A.D. While the Apostles were taking her body for burial at Gethsemani, the Jewish priests dispersed them. At this time the Angels took our Lady's body to paradise and put it under the Tree of Life (The Miracle of St. Mary, Sinaxarium Nehassie (August) 16 E.C.). According to these sources, St. John the Apostle, used to be taken to paradise to burn incense over her body. When he told this fact to the Apostles, they went for retreat and fasted for two weeks, praying to God to reveal this mystery to them. On the fourteenth day of their fast the angels brought our Lady's body and gave them to bury it.

On the third day, on the 16th of August E.C. her Assumption took place. From that time onwards, the Apostolic Church observes the fast of our Lady's Assumption.

In Ethiopia, this fast is being observed by all Orthodox Christians including children. During these 15 days, members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church even children fast and partake of the Holy Communion.

In these 15 days many elderly people go for retreat leaving their homes, abstaining from nutritious food and subsisting only on cereals and water. They spend all the fifteen days fasting and praying.

During the fast of the Assumption, the religious devotion manifested by the old and the young testifies that Ethiopia is a land dedicated to our Lady.

In the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the canon demands that all its followers above the age of seven should observe all the fasts mentioned above. Except on Saturdays and Sundays in the fasting periods, liturgy is celebrated in the afternoons.

Source: **THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH FAITH, ORDER OF WORSHIP
AND ECUMENICAL RELATIONS**