

## THE PRAYER OF ST EPHREM THE SYRIAN: A GUIDE TO THE LENTEN JOURNEY

The prayer of St Ephrem is part of every Lenten service celebrated in the Byzantine Catholic Church because it expresses the goals of the Great Fast simply and precisely.

*“Lord and Master of my life, spare me from the spirit of indifference, despair, lust for power and idle chatter.*

*Instead, bestow on me, Your servant, the spirit of humility, integrity, patience and love.*

*Yes, O Lord and King, let me see my own sins, and not judge my brothers and sisters, for You are holy, always, now and ever, and forever, Amen.”*

First, it re-establishes our basic relationship with God. He is **Lord, Master and King**. We are His **servants**. We are in His debt for our **life** itself. Next, the prayer identifies the sinfulness in our lives we try to make for ourselves apart from God. The worst comes first: **indifference and despair**. The great spiritual teachers sum these two attitudes up as **akedia**, the eighth and worst of the deadly sins. I know I am far from God and liable to judgment but I don't care enough to do anything about it. I don't care that I don't care. That's akedia. Ironically, the more we slip into passivity and paralysis in our spiritual lives, the more likely we are to become nervously hyperactive in everyday life. Wherever I push God out of my life, there remains only myself to fill in the void. So rejecting God's Lordship over me usually results in my attempt to seek **power** and control for myself. Where prayer is silenced, the noise of **idle chatter** rushes in—everything from the nervous voice inside my head to endless gossip to nonstop audio, video and texts from all the gadgets to which we become addicted. Notice the insistence on the word **spirit**-- these are more attitudes and habits than specific sinful acts. Many Catholics see no reason to come to Confession because “I haven't done anything.” St Ephrem challenges us to a more mature view of sin, to recognize the sinfulness that becomes our lifestyle and our personality.

St Ephrem next provides the antidotes to this toxic way of being. Once again, it's about a **spirit**, a change of basic attitudes that is required. **Humility** is the cure for my tendency to set myself up as lord and master of my own life—and of other people's too! The Greek word translated as **integrity** could be described as a combination of practical wisdom (not shrewdness) and self-discipline (not self-indulgence) in our relationships with others. It's about honesty, sincerity and chastity all together. It's about not using others. Anyone who has ever been successful in friendship or especially in marriage knows that **patience and love** must go together. Both express the same spirit of willingness to sacrifice ourselves for others. Whenever we choose to be patient, forgiving and loving, we are growing in likeness to God Himself.

The third sentence sums up everything that needs to be said about having a right relationship with God and with others. First, I must recognize my basic relatedness to others—they are my **brothers and sisters** because we are all depend for our lives on the same Heavenly Father. Think how many conditions we usually add before we are willing to identify with others rather than distinguish ourselves from them (in a spirit of pride). God alone is good and holy; any virtue we may possess comes from Him and reflects in a very imperfect way who He is. A judgmental attitude is one more expression of pride and a lust for power over others. It is also an attempt to avoid confronting my own sinfulness by focusing on that of others. We avoid Confession saying, “I'm no worse than anyone else.” We justify ourselves by claiming we don't kill or steal or commit adultery—and stop the examination of our consciences right there before we are forced to confront our own sin. We choose the one thing we do right and judge others on the basis of that. The Pharisee (Luke 18, 10-14) typifies this sort of judgmentalism—the typical sin of people who take the first steps in the spiritual life and decided they've arrived. An honest awareness of my utter dependence on God and my profound relatedness to other people will teach me to avoid judgmentalism, to focus my energies on my own repentance, to overcome the temptation not to care and to grow closer and closer to God. Eight centuries before Christ, the prophet Micah (6,8) reported God's challenge to His people which so resembles the prayer of St Ephrem: “You have heard, O man, what is required of

you: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

## THE FORTY DAYS OF THE GREAT FAST

We traditionally speak of Lent as forty days of fasting. The Triodion, the prayerbook that guides us through the Fast, compares these forty days to a number of major moments in the story of our salvation.

Noah and his family spent forty days and forty nights in the Ark while the Lord purified the world of sin (Genesis 7,18; 8,6). Moses fasted for forty days on Mt Sinai before receiving the Law (Exodus 24,18). St Elias fasted for forty days on his journey to the mountain to encounter God there and renew his dedication to serve as God's prophet (1 Kings 19,8). Jesus Himself gives us the example of fasting for forty days in the desert immediately after His Baptism (Matthew 4,2), before He began His three-year public ministry that climaxed in His Passion and Resurrection. On a larger scale, the Great Fast resembles the forty-year journey of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt toward serving the Lord in the promised land.

But how exactly do we count the forty days? The Christian week begins on Sunday, the first day of the week (Mark 16,2) and the Christian day begins at sundown. Hence, the new week begins with Vespers on Saturday evenings. The Great Fast lasts six weeks, beginning on Clean Monday and ending at Lazarus Saturday. Six weeks of seven days each equals forty two days. We subtract Cheesefare Sunday (Lent begins with Forgiveness Vespers that evening) and Lazarus Saturday (Lent ends at Vespers on the 6<sup>th</sup> Friday of the Fast). 42-2=40. In the Byzantine Tradition the Sundays of Lent are part of the Great Fast, which is why abstinence (from meat and dairy) traditionally continues on Sundays although fasting (restriction of the quantity of food taken) does not. Great and Holy Week is not considered part of the Great Fast in the Byzantine Tradition. It is a separate fast, connected entirely with the events of our Lord's Passion and Resurrection.

Western Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, compute Lent differently. Lent begins on a Wednesday and ends with Holy Saturday. Western Christians do not count the Lenten Sundays as part of the fast and

therefore have the custom of allowing themselves on Sundays whatever they may have given up during the weekdays of the fast. The week of Ash Wednesday thus has four days, the five full weeks of Lent have six days each and Holy Week has six days of fasting, making a total of forty days (4+30+6=40).

## THE TRIODION: THE GUIDE FOR THE JOURNEY OF THE FAST

The Triodion is the Byzantine liturgical book that contains special prayers and hymns for every day of the Great Fast. Its texts were collected or composed in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century by two great poets and saints: Theodore and Joseph, brothers in the flesh and monks at the urban monastery called the Studion in Constantinople.

The great themes of the Triodion include the original beauty of God's creation and the devastation created by the first human sin; the struggle to return to paradise, the great examples of repentance from the Bible; the example of the Holy Martyrs; the fast as an athletic competition; the fast as therapy for our souls; the fast as a new Exodus; the fast as a journey toward participation in the Resurrection of Christ. The hymns of the Triodion often invite us to speak directly to our own souls and to take stock of our lives. Portions of the Triodion are sung at the Liturgy of the Presanctified and as the troparion and kontakion at Sunday Divine Liturgy.

Along with these poetic hymns, the Triodion assigns portions of the biblical books of Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms and Proverbs to be read each day of the fast. (You can find the daily portions for all but Psalms on the Church wall calendar).

The Triodion is available online at [www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/prayers/triodion/triodion.html](http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/prayers/triodion/triodion.html) and [www.anastasis.org.uk/triodion.htm](http://www.anastasis.org.uk/triodion.htm).