

The Good Word

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FASTING FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS: ITS HISTORY AND PRACTICE

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Since we are now entering into the Great Fast that precedes the Feast of Feasts, Holy Pascha, it behooves us to consider precisely what is meant in the Orthodox Church by fasting, how fasting developed as part of the Orthodox way of life, and what its purpose is, in other words, how do we benefit from fasting. Let us first explore examples of fasting in the Old Testament.

In the first book of the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis, God says to our First Parents that *of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die* [Gen. 2:16-17]. God put our First Parents in a wonderful garden, filled with the most superb fruits growing on the trees. They were invited to partake of all of the fruit with only one exception, which was the fruit of the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, from which they were commanded permanently to fast. That command by their Maker, Almighty God, they disobeyed, and so paid a horrific penalty. We know also that the Old Testament Hebrews were commanded permanently to abstain from certain foods, that is, to fast completely from them.¹ In the Old Testament too we are told that the Holy Prophet Jonah warned the people of Nineveh that God was angry because of their sinful lives and would soon destroy them. But the

people of Nineveh saved their city from calamity by entering into a strict fast of repentance and by turning away from evil.² As a result God was merciful to them. The Holy Prophet Moses fasted before he received the Ten Commandments from God³, as did the Holy Prophet Daniel before his entreaty to God to save his people.⁴

In the New Testament, Christ instructed His disciples to conceal their fasting, rebuking those who “disfigure their faces” to make a public exhibition of their fasting.⁵ From that passage we know that fasting during the time of Christ’s public ministry was not unlike that which we practice today. So there is nothing innovative about fasting. There is the example too of Christ Jesus Himself fasting for forty days before being tempted by the Evil One.⁶ In explaining to His disciples why they failed to cast a demon from a man, Christ answered that *This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting* [Mark 9:29]. Saint Theophylact of Ochrid and Bulgaria remarks that “true prayer is rendered when it is yoked to fasting.”⁷ In other words, sincere prayer, when joined with fasting, is more efficacious because it is more focused. Finally, we read that it was the practice in the early Church for the Apostles to fast before making crucial decisions or actions.⁸ That also was a matter of fasting to increase focus, to heighten perception. So we see that Holy Scripture has many references to fasting.

Ecclesiastical historian Henry Chadwick writes that, “Like the Jews, the early Christians kept certain days for fasting. Jewish custom kept Mondays and Thursdays as fast days.... By the end of the first century at least, the Christian fast days were Wednesdays and Fridays.”⁹ Wednesdays were a fast day since that was the day on which Christ was betrayed, and Fridays since that was the day of Christ’s Crucifixion. And so it remains unchanged even to this day.

The pre-Paschal fast (what we now call the Great Fast) also appeared very early, although initially it was much shorter. In this regard, we must understand that until Saint Constantine’s Edict of Milan, which

² Jonah 3:4-10.

³ Exodus 34:28.

⁴ Daniel 9:3.

⁵ St. Matthew 6:16.


⁶ St. Matthew 4:2-4.

⁷ *The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel According to St. Mark*, Fr. Christopher Stade, trans., Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 77.

⁸ Acts 13:2 & 14:23.

⁹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Dorset Press, New York, NY, 1967, p. 259.74

¹ Leviticus 11.



proclaimed toleration for the Church, Christianity was regarded as an illicit religion and those adhering to it lived with the continuous threat of persecution. That persecution was intermittent, but even during periods when official actions against the Church ceased, mob actions against suspected Christians were frequent, often resulting in the lynching of the accused. When, however, the government ordered persecution, thousands of Christians were sent to their deaths, perhaps in the arena to be devoured by wild animals, by forced labor in conditions that guaranteed a very short life, or in a hundred other ways. The point here is that simply to accept membership in the Church was to accept a serious risk to oneself and to one's family. That living in fear, with a constant threat to one's life, tended to sharpen one's faith, to focus it in the same way that serious fasting does in less threatening circumstances. Hence, it was not until the fourth century—after the Church was granted her freedom—that the forty-day Great Fast became a general practice throughout Christendom. Moreover, as Archimandrite Akakios points out in his excellent book on fasting, early in the fourth century “this pre-Paschal fast had undergone a transformation, both in form and length ... and became centered—because of its long duration—more on the restriction in the kinds of food eaten than total abstinence from food...”¹⁰ Obviously, one cannot keep a total fast, that is, eating and drinking nothing, for forty days. Yet one can limit the quantity of food eaten and, more importantly, one can abstain from the foods that were known to exacerbate the inclination to sin. And so it was that the Great Fast came to be.

What is it in certain foods that tends to excite the passions, to exacerbate the inclination to sin, as we just noted? Present in the flesh of animals are certain hormones that occur naturally (and nowadays much meat has additional hormones and other chemicals added artificially to stimulate growth). Animal products, such as milk and cheese, also contain these hormones. It is quite true, of course, that when the fasting rules were established our spiritual forebears had no specific knowledge of these things and no way of identifying, detecting, or measuring chemicals such as hormones. How, then, did they come to grasp the necessity to fast from animal products? As I wrote some years ago, “The answer is that while it is true that they did not have our modern scientific instruments, they did have the scientific method, which encompasses observation, the collection of data, and the formation and testing of hypotheses. In a word, observation, careful observation, taught the Holy Fathers what they teach us with regard to fasting.”¹¹ So that is why we abstain from all animal products during fasting periods. That also is why

¹⁰ Archimandrite Akakios, *Fasting in the Orthodox Church*, Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, Etna, CA, 1990, p. 9.

¹¹ Father James Thornton, *Quickened With Christ: Sermons on the Sunday Epistle Readings of the Orthodox Liturgical Year*, Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, Etna, CA, 2004, p. 48

monastics abstain from meat—that is the flesh of all land animals including poultry—at all times, although fish is allowed on days when there is no fast.

Before we consider the reasons for fasting let us dispose of a misunderstanding about fasting that is prevalent among the non-Orthodox. According to this misconception, we fast from certain foods that we find especially pleasant and eat only things that are somewhat less agreeable in order deliberately to cause ourselves privation. The suffering from that privation pleases God since it appeases Him for our many sins, according to this view. Thus, we fast to mitigate God's anger. Why is that view incorrect? (I quote here again from a sermon I delivered some years ago.)

“First, God is not in any way pleased by any human privation, suffering, or discomfort. He loves us totally and unconditionally and desires only happiness for us.


“Secondly, we can never repay God for our sins, we cannot make satisfaction to Him for our transgressions. The relationship of a sinful human being to his Maker is not that of a reckless driver to a traffic judge, where a fine is paid to satisfy offended society for a violation of the law. It is rather like that of a child to a loving Father—a Father Who chastises an unruly child in order better to shape the child's personality and character and to inculcate obedience. We do not purchase freedom from the consequences of sin by voluntary privation or by causing ourselves pain. We achieve this freedom by repentance, by confession, by a firm resolve to avoid sin, and by turning evermore towards Christ in our lives. That is what pleases our Heavenly Father.

“Thirdly, we cannot purchase our way to eternal life by voluntarily giving up meat, dairy products, chocolate candy, watching football, or going to the movies, [etc., etc.,] considering such acts in and of themselves. ‘Giving up something for Lent,’ depriving ourselves of something we enjoy, for the purpose of assuaging God's anger, is not at all a Christian idea but entirely primitive and entirely pagan in essence, since the pagans were forever trying to appease their gods' anger through such empty acts of superstition.”¹²

Why then do we fast? The true reasons we fast begin with what we have already discussed; by lowering certain chemical substances (some natural, some artificial) in our diets it becomes less difficult to resist sin. Fasting moderates the sinful inclinations of our fallen human natures making us less susceptible to the enticements of the Evil One. Let us be clear that fasting *moderates* these inclinations, it does not remove them altogether. Effort is still required, though our struggle is lessened.

A second reason for fasting is that it places each of us in control of our own bodies. Instead of allowing our appetites or our stomachs to be our master, we take

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 49.



command and become the masters over ourselves. By achieving this mastery over what we eat, we strengthen ourselves so that the same determined self-control can be applied in situations in our lives other than fasting. Countless men and women are slaves to various sins. By taking control as I have just described they can overthrow their slave master, the Evil One.

A third reason, and of equal importance, is that fasting from the more luxurious and expensive foods and restricting ourselves to simple fare saves money. That money, in turn, can be devoted to almsgiving, to assist the poor. Since almsgiving is a central feature in the Orthodox way of life just as is fasting, by fasting and designating the money saved to the poor we are doubly successful and, consequently, we are doubly blessed. We must remember that Christ Jesus Himself placed the greatest emphasis on charity, going so far as to threaten eternal damnation to those who refused to be charitable towards the poor and those who suffer (see St. Matthew 25:31-46 and St. Luke 16:19-31). Saint Peter, in his first epistle, tells us that *Above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins* [1 Pet. 4:8]. Many great Saints have repeated that dictum that charity, almsgiving, will blot out sins.

Insofar as quantity is concerned, one should keep meals simple and of moderate size. The spirit of the fast is hardly maintained if one gorges oneself to satiety (or beyond) on the food that is permitted. With reference to quantity, Saint Nicholas of Ochrid and Žiĉa writes: “Gluttony makes a man gloomy and fearful, but fasting makes him joyful and courageous. And, as gluttony calls forth greater and greater gluttony, so fasting stimulates greater and greater endurance... By fasting, a man lightens both his body and his spirit from the weight of darkness and grossness. His body becomes light and vigorous, and his spirit bright and clear.”¹³

Doing all that we have described, then our perception of spiritual truths and of the reality of the spiritual world will become greatly enhanced. In that regard, Saint John Chrysostomos states the following: “Fasting is wonderful, because it tramples our sins like a dirty weed, while it cultivates and raises truth like a flower.”¹⁴

Let me add here a word of caution: fasting is not intended to cause harm, therefore, those who are seriously or chronically ill, infants, pregnant women, and mothers nursing infants, should not undertake this kind of fasting without the explicit approval of a medical doctor.

We close with some wise counsel from the Saints:

Saint John of Kronstadt writes that, “Those who reject fasting take away from themselves and from

others the weapons against their flesh, with its manifold vices, and against the Devil... Therefore they are not soldiers of Christ, for they throw down their weapons, and surrender themselves willingly as prisoners to their sensual and sin-loving flesh.”¹⁵

Saint John Chrysostomos reminds us that fasting includes more than simply avoiding certain foods: “For the honor of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices; since he who limits his fasting only to an abstinence from meats, is one who especially disparages [fasting]. Dost thou fast? Give me proof of it by thy works! Is it said by what kind of works? If thou seest a poor man, take pity on him! If thou seest an enemy, be reconciled to him! If thou seest a friend gaining honor, envy him not! If thou seest a handsome woman, pass her by! For let not the mouth only fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all of the members of our bodies.”¹⁶



ST. NEPHON'S CORNER:

ON “HOW SOULS TRAVEL TO HEAVEN”¹⁷ [CONCERNING THE AERIAL TOLL HOUSES]

EDITOR'S¹⁸ INTRODUCTION

St. Theophan the Recluse writes, “We must be ready at every hour--one does not know when the Lord will come, either for the Last Judgment or to take you from here. For you they are the same. Death decides everything. After death comes the results of your life; whatever you've acquired, you'll have to be satisfied with it for all eternity... We all know that death will come at any moment, that it is impossible to escape it, but meanwhile almost no one at all thinks about it--and it will come suddenly and seize us.”¹⁹

Great Lent is given to us by the Church to remind

15 *Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt*, W. Jardine Grisbrooke, Ed., James Clarke & Co. Ltd., London, UK, 1967, p. 166.

16 “St. Chrysostom: The Homilies on the Statues to the People of Antioch,” trans. The Rev. W.R.W. Stephens, M.A., in *Saint Chrysostom: On the Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues, Chrysostom, Vol. IX of 1st Series of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI: 1983), p. 359.

17. *Stories, Sermons, and Prayers of St. Nephon: An Ascetic Bishop*, Light & Life Publishers, Minneapolis, MN, 1989, pp. 79-86.

18. Dr. Seraphim Steger

19. St. Theophan the Recluse, *Thoughts for Each Day of the Year According to the Daily Church Readings from the Word of God*, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 2012, pp. 270-1.

13 Nikolai Velimirović, Bishop of Ochrid, *Homilies: A Commentary on the Gospel Readings for Great Feasts and Sundays Throughout the Year, Vol. One, Great Feasts, Lent, Eastertide and Pentecost*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, UK, 1996, p. 131.

14 <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/62492.htm>

us of our mortality, our impending deaths, our future destiny, and to encourage us to seek our Lord Jesus Christ with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength--to seek the Kingdom of Heaven. Consequently, the Church's teachings on the aerial toll houses through which dead men's souls must pass, being very instructive, can spur us on to compunction of heart, repentance, and traveling that narrow path that leads to life. It is in that spirit that these early teaching on the aerial toll houses are presented.

St. Nephon's revelation on "How Souls Travel to Heaven"²⁰ is the most detailed of the early descriptions of the aerial toll-houses. It provides views of the different fates of a number of persons immediately after their repose, revealing God's judgment on unrepentant sinners as well as His love for and great mercy to the repentant. It would appear that Nephon received this revelation prior to being ordained bishop c. AD 324-6. St. Athanasius the Great, who was present as a deacon at St. Nephon's elevation to the throne of Constantia, penned the famous and popular *Life of Antony*²¹ around AD 354, wherein he recorded St. Antony the Great's dramatic vision of "the enemy" attempting to impede the ascent of reposed souls to Heaven. Other early Christian writers hinted at similar things.²² However, St. Nephon's vision is much more detailed, albeit less well known. Nevertheless, it appears that the great Alexandrian scholar Origen (c. AD 185 - c. AD 255), later anathematized as a heretic by the 5th Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in AD 553,²³ was first to allude to the concept of "toll-houses" under the guise of "tax collectors" decades before either St. Nephon or St. Antony. In his Homily 23 from the *Commentary on Luke*, thought to be written prior to AD 244, Origen not only likened the aerial demons to tax collectors but also provided a strong Scriptural basis for the same.²⁴



ST. NEPHON'S VISION OF HOW SOULS TRAVEL TO HEAVEN

Once when he was praying and had his gaze turned to Heaven, a divine light shone in front of him.

20. *Stories Sermons and prayers of St. Nephon: An Ascetic Bishop*, Light & Life Publishing Co., Minneapolis MN, 1989, pp. 79-86.

21. St. Athanasius the Great, *The Life of Antony*, Ancient Christian Writers series, Newman Press, New York, NY, 1978, §66, pp. 75-76.

22. cf. <http://classicalchristianity.com/?s=Tollhouses>

23. Fr. James Thornton, *The OEcumenical Synods of the Orthodox Church: A Concise History*, Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, Etna, CA, 2007, p. 88.

24. Origen, *Homily 23 in The Fathers of the Church Volume 94: Homilies on Luke*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1996, ¶ 5-7, pp. 99-100.



Saint Nephon (Dec 23) was a wonderworking 4th century hierarch, who lived most of his life in Constantinople. He was ordained Bishop of Constantia, Cyprus, during the reign of Constantine the Great (AD 324-337), when St. Alexander was Archbishop of Alexandria (AD 313-326), i.e., c. AD 324-326. Nephon's life was recorded by his disciple, hieromonk Peter. Icon: acrylic on wood, Fr. Yakov Ferens 2015.

At the same time a white-clad angel, dressed as a deacon, appeared. He was holding a gold censer and censed first in the direction of Heaven and then Nephon. Suddenly the gates of Heaven opened and the angels of God ascended and descended like bees, transporting the souls of people who had died. The evil spirits of the air were struggling to grab them and throw them down, but the angels resisted violently, whipping them and saving the souls.

Astonished, the saint saw a soul being taken up to heaven. But as soon as they approached the toll booth of immortality, its leader started to shake and become wild. "With what right," he was shouting, "do you take that soul which belongs to us?"

And the angels answered him: "Prove to us what authority you have over this man."

"Up until his death," the demon said, "he was wallowing voluntarily in all kinds of indecencies. And not only this, but he also judged others. What crimes more horrible than these do you want?"

"Yes," the angels admitted, "he was a slave to these passions, but he cut them before he died."

"No! It's not the way you're telling me," the demon squealed. "He died unrepented. To his last

breath he violated the law without ever confessing his sins. He was and still is mine.”

Then one of the angels said: “We are not about to believe you, who are entirely wallowing in falsehood. Let’s call his angel. He will tell us the whole truth.”

They called him, because he was still guarding the body until its internment. As soon as he came, they asked him: “Tell us, brother, did this soul repent for its sins or did it die with them? Tell us the whole truth.”

Then the angel answered: “I am neither human nor an impudent spirit to tell lies, but before God I assure you: from the time he became ill, even before he took a turn for the worse, he thought of death. Then he began to cry and confess his sins to God. Continually he would raise his hands toward the Most High asking for mercy. If God will, He will forgive him. If not, glory to His righteous judgment!”

As soon as the angels heard this, they laughed at the devil. Thus the humble soul was liberated from the snares of its enemies.



Icon: *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 12th Century,
St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt

In a little while the saint saw another soul being carried up. It belonged to a blasphemous and hard man. The demons were accusing him a lot, reminding him one-by-one of the improper words and grave curses he

used to say to the people when he was alive.

The angels said in rebuttal that he had a few rights to salvation. Many times, for example, even though he was thinking of doing something bad, he would immediately repent, reproaching and degrading himself. Often he would sigh bitterly and sometimes he would tear. Once in a while he would even give a little charity to the poor. Having this in mind, the angels of light claimed that God would have mercy on that soul. Angered then the demons said: “From his youth he did things that were not right for a Christian: He polluted himself with different sins and, indeed, sodomitic ones. Where shall we place his curses and anger? And the worst, he even committed murder. If therefore he must be saved, then take the whole world and all the sinners of the earth and save them gratis; because we are laboring and getting upset in vain!”

“Keep in mind, wretches, that he cut off all his youthful sins and God forgave him. And if sometimes he did something, he cleansed it with repentance. What do you want then, wild beasts? --that his soul be condemned? Impossible, since God forgives the sins people confess tearfully and humbly and do not repeat. *Anything that becomes visible is light.* The righteous Judge punishes only those sins they take with them.


Thus the angels defeated the spirits of wickedness and entered into the gate of Heaven. Therefore, that creature of God was also liberated from the claws of the demons, and He Who saves freely, granted him salvation.

Again the blessed one saw them lifting still another soul that was very devout and God-fearing. She spent all her life in purity, modesty, and a great deal of charity. She showed love toward all. The dragons of the air threatened her, gnashing their teeth. And that poor thing, terrified by their wildness, shriveled up in the bosom of the angels of God, while the angels descending to take up other souls kissed her with love.

When that holy soul ascended into heaven, a large number of good spirits gathered around her, embracing and kissing her tenderly, and saying joyfully: “Glory to God Who delivered this soul from the dreadful dragon!”

It was a delight to see them. The heavenly powers always do this: they rejoice and celebrate for each Christian who is saved. When they reached the throne of Grace, they brought her to the feet of the Lord Jesus, and He permitted her to worship His Father and to be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Later He turned her over to Michael, the lord of the covenant, to guide her to eternal rest, as indeed it happened.



Down further, however, the servant of God saw the demons dragging a soul to the infernal regions. It was the soul of some servant who had hung himself. Behind him followed his guardian angel weeping bitterly for his loss. In the midst of his tears he was saying: “Ah, the foxy demons who make people do such evil! There, this servant’s master, obeying the demons, would become angry, hit him terribly, and let him starve to death. And this poor soul became desperate, took the rope and hung himself, offering his life wholly a sacrifice to Satan. Ah, alas! The Almighty gave him to me to guard after his baptism, and the filthy dragon snatched him from me suddenly and devoured him! How will I appear to my Lord in this grieving and bitter state? But also, how will I face my Maker sorrowful for the loss of this soul?”

While he was painfully saying this, another angel appeared from heaven. “Our Father, the Lord of hosts,” he told him, “commands you to go to Rome, where this very moment the son of a soldier is being baptized. Take charge of him and guard him through the Holy Spirit given to him at baptism. And I shall punish the master of this servant and teach him not to become angry nor hit his servants nor let them starve to death.”

The angel said this on behalf of God and ascended into heaven, while the former set out for Rome according to the divine command.

That instant Nephon saw them bringing up a soul with a lot of commotion. Multitudes of demons were making noise and were attempting to snatch the unfortunate soul. It was the soul of a clergyman who had spent his life in immorality. He even committed murders! He would lie in wait in the street at night and kill the passers by. They he would take their clothes and sell them to feed his jesters!

Therefore, as that wretched soul was ascending, it didn’t make it through the fourth station: the dragon stretched out his hands with impudence, snatched it from the angels and cast it down to earth. The demons took it then, lowered it into the abyss and turned it over to the prince of darkness, so that it might remain captive there along with similar sinful souls, until the day of the common resurrection.

As the dark demons were returning again, they were puffed up and put on airs saying amongst themselves: “Look, we even beat the clergy of the Nazarene and trample them under foot.”

One of them sadly whispered: “Why are we bragging that we destroyed one unfortunate soul? I can show you a large number of priests who shine with virtue; we can’t even touch them.”

“If they didn’t have the mark of Jesus,” the others

answered, “and His help all around them, then you’d see our power.”

“And why should we fear the wood on which the Nazarene was nailed? This is an example of complete decadence.”


“It is not the wood, but the terrible lightning which pours forth from it. The bad part is that the lightning which burns us doesn’t come only from the wood, but the same thing happens when the Christians sign themselves with this symbol.”

Then to trap him the others said to him: “And when did you experience all this?”

“In Constantinople there is a relentless enemy of ours named Nephon. I and others of us threw ourselves at him from his youth. We used to send him provocative temptations all day. We inflamed him so terribly that in the end he fell into sin. And while we registered his defeat with a lot of pride, he repented at the same instant and started reproaching himself and weeping: ‘Oh! For this body that the worms will eat, I yielded to my evil desire. Woe to me, it is this that will throw me into the fire.’ And saying this he became like a maniac. We laughed at his expense. But he who was very foxy and knew our tricks shouted to us: ‘Now I’ll show you, corrupt demons!’ He got up and once, and with his hand he traced the sign of the Nazarene on us. Oh! It was as if fire passed through our hearts immediately. Terrorized we dispersed instantly. Only one of us dared to stand far off, to see what he was going to do. We saw him enter the church quickly. He prostrated himself to God three times and said: Lord, I am a sinful man, young in age, still struggling with my passions and the fire of the flesh. Therefore, do not count this fall of mine as sin. You are Lord and have authority to forgive my offenses with only Your word.’

“As soon as he said these words, an angel crowned him for his repentance and contrition. In spite of all this,” the demon continued, “furious with his flesh, he began to strike his face with all the strength he had. Later, he lifted his hands again to heaven and beseeched God, saying: ‘You, the fearful God, Who gave birth to the fearful Son, and rule everywhere with Your fearful Spirit, hear me, the filthy one. And torture those abominations who roar with laughter at my expense. For against Thee only have I sinned, I, the filthy and corrupt one.’

“At once the angel who had crowned him threw a rope and tied us all together. Then taking us out one by one, he gave us each a thousand blows. With our cries and woes we raised the roof. As he was hitting us, he was saying: ‘So that you may never be the reason again for the servants of God to hit their bodies!’ And after



that compassionless angel tortured us a lot, we barely got away. From that time, then, whenever I see that Nephon I vanish, because I fear the beatings!..."

When the demon finished his tale, the others started making fun of him and calling him wretched, unfortunate, and a coward.

In the meantime, in his vision Nephon was following everything the evil spirits were saying about him, and laughed at them.

After a little while he saw an angel descending toward Constantinople, the seven-hilled city. He was holding a terrible flaming sword. Someone, tormented pitifully, was dying at that hour. He was a compassionless usurer. In addition, he used to gossip scandalously about Nephon: he called him a heretic, a hypocrite, etc. Why is he this and that? Why does he do this or that?" The miserable one didn't look at himself but concerned himself with others.

Well, the angel of fire came and stood by his bed looking toward heaven, as if waiting for something. Indeed a voice was heard: "Quickly punish the antichrist severely and cut the prodigal soul from the bonds of the body. When he lived, this good-for-nothing never did My will. And not only that, but he also judged My servant Nephon. Hit him fiercely! May he never again choke the poor by lending them gold."

As soon as the punishing angel heard the voice, he heartily struck the miserable usurer with all the strength he had, and he gave up the spirit at once gnashing his teeth and groaning from the depths of his soul. The angel took his soul which was terribly tormented and turned toward the abyss...

Then St. Nephon came to himself. Dumbfounded and sad for all he had seen, he thought and said: "Ah, how much misery we, humble and sinful, hide! And then Judgment and the terrible fire come wherever we go for all eternity. We must aim for salvation at all costs, forcing ourselves to do good. Only in this way we will please God and not violate His commandments." And immediately he prayed:

"O Lord, my God, I've placed my hope in You; deliver me from those who pursue me and save me. The treacherous prince of darkness, like a roaring lion, will snatch my miserable soul, if You, my Christ, do not deliver it and save it by Your Holy Spirit... Blessed is he who obeys You, Who became poor and destitute for our salvation; because at the time of his death You will redeem him from the corrupt spirits of wickedness who, like evil censors, shameless accusers, compassionless overseers, stand and seek to devour his poor soul. O fearful and Almighty Master, Who shakes everything, and they tremble, deliver the race of Christians from

those tyrants. Have mercy on all those who have placed their hopes in You, O Holy One, and forgive them, who grievously transgress Your law and ceaselessly embitter Your compassion."

He was still tearful from the thought of that poor usurer whose soul was taken by the avenging angel with the flaming sword. He was thinking how bitter his death was without any pity from God--even though he occasionally gave something to the poor from the interest he collected!... Because, as Nephon said, at the time his miserable soul was being tormented, he cried out: "Remember, O Lord, the alms I gave to the poor." But a voice was heard saying: "Yes, wretch! You drank the blood of the poor and watered other poor men with it!... Shall I be merciful to you for that, or because you slandered the one I love? Night and day he prays for the sinners. He wouldn't stop beseeching even for you. Then, why did you speak evil of him? Learn now that you should not have judged anyone!..."

Nephon related all this to his acquaintances and advised them: "Be careful, my children, not to judge anyone, especially if he is a man of God. I beg you, guard yourselves from this sin. Look after yourselves and be conscious of your own faults. With this consciousness we will be able to repent. Some of the servants of God show and some hide their virtue. Certain people criticize those who have the courage to be seen. However, these will be punished harshly on Judgment Day. For God has placed before all men those who scorn human glory, so that they may confess their faith with courage, and thus benefit many. *Let your light so shine before men*, He commanded them, *so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in Heaven*. And conversely, to those who lean toward conceit He says: *Those who do the works of righteousness openly to be pleasing to people and not to Me, truly, truly, I say to you, they have received their reward*. For he who willfully is vain will not receive mercy. Keeping this in mind, then, my children, let us not judge anyone, and let us not pay attention to the slanderers, whether they criticize a righteous person or anyone else. *Judge not*, the Lord commands. You who sit on the throne, do not scorn your servant, for he may hide within him the Spirit of God and, without realizing it, you find yourself the enemy of God."

The saint said this to them and begged them once more to look to themselves and not judge anyone. But also they should not lend money with interest, for how does it profit a man to say he is a Christian, when he has stored up gold and lends it out with interest? First of all, he does not have his hope in God. Second, he is an idolater. Third, he suffers of avarice and drowns night

THE GOOD WORD

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and day in cares. He doesn't even get enough sleep! Finally, death comes, too. Oh, what foolishness!...



A SPIRITUAL WEAPON: "THE OIL OF THE VIGIL LAMP"²⁵

The saint also had the following amazing habit: when he was to sleep a little, he would first spread stones on the ground and throw a small mattress there. Then he would chant funeral hymns, as if he were planning to bury himself, and recite by heart four Epistle lessons, four Gospels, and a few other things. Finally, making the sign of the cross three times on his bed, he would lie down using a stone for a pillow.

The demons often attacked him in his sleep. They would bother him and would not let him sleep. Then he would take his stick and with spiritual strength hit them wildly, mocking their weakness. So much so that the demons had lost it with him.

One night, therefore, when the servant of God was sleeping a little, the devil came holding a spade and wanted to hit him. But suddenly, very terrified, he

jumped noisily outside again and disappeared like smoke. As he was leaving he was gnashing his teeth and saying: "O Mary, you burn me everywhere, protecting this hardhead.

Hearing these words, Nephon realized that the Theotokos defended and guarded him. And this because every night before sleeping, he would take oil from her oil lamp and anoint his forehead, ears, and all his sensory organs. This is why the devil was routed and disappeared.

From then he saw the power this oil of the Theotokos and all the saints had, and oftentimes he would give it to his acquaintances to anoint themselves at bedtime.



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25. *Stories, Sermons, and Prayers of St. Nephon: An Ascetic Bishop*, Light & Life Publishing Company, Minneapolis, MN, 1989 pp. 27-8.

