



An Explanation of the Season of Lent

(from crosswalk.com)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. Matthew 4:1-2

Lent's 40 Days Period Starts with Ash Wednesday

Every year, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and is always 46 days before Easter Sunday. Lent is a 40-day season (not counting Sundays) marked by repentance, fasting, reflection, and ultimately celebration. The 40-day period represents Christ's time of temptation in the wilderness, where he fasted and where Satan tempted him. Lent asks believers to set aside a time each year for similar fasting, marking an intentional season of focus on Christ's life, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection. The key event of Lent include Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday.

Ash Wednesday is the start of Lent and many Christians get a cross on their foreheads from the ashes during a church service. The ashes symbolize grief and the acceptance of our sinful state.

Maundy Thursday is recognized as the day before Jesus is crucified. It is believed to be the day Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples and most notably, washed their feet as a display of humility and love.

Good Friday is the day we remember the crucifixion and death of Jesus on the cross. It is called "good" because it is part of God's plan for our salvation. God's good plan to redeem us from sin included the suffering of Jesus.

Easter Sunday is the often referred to as the most important day in Christian history. Three days after his death, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus rose again, conquering the grave and death. Through Jesus, we have the opportunity to have eternal forgiveness for our sins, relationship with God, and eternity in heaven.

What is Lent and How Do We Celebrate it?

Just as we set aside time to spiritually prepare for Christmas Day, it makes sense to set aside time to prepare for the two most important days of the Christian year - Good Friday and Easter. Lent is a time that offers us an opportunity to come to terms with the human condition we may spend the rest of the year running from and it brings our need for a Savior to the forefront.

Lent is a time to open the doors of our hearts a little wider and understand our Lord a little deeper, so that when Good Friday and eventually Easter comes, it is not just another day at church but an opportunity to receive the overflowing of graces God has to offer. Lent is more frequently observed as a solemn time of preparation for remembering of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. From the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday till Lent ends on Easter Sunday, Lent is traditional a time of fasting or giving something up, known as abstinence. Lent gives us time to prepare our minds and hearts for remembering the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Prayer is a large focus during Lent. During the 40 days, we seek God's forgiveness, accept his love and mercy, and repent, or turn from our sins. The act of fasting or abstaining from something, like our favorite food or activity, not only gives us time to pray but reminds us of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice.

The History and Origin of Lent

So where does Lent come from and who started it? The Lenten season developed as part of the historical Christian calendar and is typically celebrated by Catholics and some mainline Protestant churches that follow a liturgical calendar. Although its format has varied throughout the centuries and throughout different cultures, the basic concept remains the same: to open our hearts to God's refining grace through prayer, confession, fasting, and almsgiving as we anticipate Holy Week. Lent traditionally lasts forty days, modeled after Christ's forty-day fast in the desert, and ends on Good Friday. In the Western Church, Lent officially begins with a reminder of our mortality on Ash Wednesday. Lent is an intensely penitential time as we examine our sinful natures and return to the God we have, through our own rebelliousness, hurt time and again. Lent is also an opportunity to contemplate what our Lord really did for us on the Cross - and it wasn't pretty. But ultimately, the purpose of Lent does not stop at sadness and despair - it points us to the hope of the Resurrection and the day when every tear will be dried (Rev. 21:4). *And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Matthew 27:33-49

Practicing Lent Traditions

You can benefit from celebrating Lent even if your church does not formally do so. Here are some of the key elements of the Lenten season, along with some of the symbolism that comes with it. Many of these practices can be celebrated both individually and as a community:

- **Purple:** Like Advent, the official color for Lent is purple. Usually, churches that celebrate Lent choose the deepest, darkest shade of purple for this special season. They may also strip their churches bare of some of the usual decorations adorning the walls. Purple is the color of repentance for sins and also symbolizes the state of our souls outside the light of Christ. During this time, pray for those who do not know Christ and for those who have sinned gravely against Him.
- **Confession:** As mentioned above, Lent is a penitential season or expressed sorrow and repentance. The 40 days are set aside to really examine areas of recurring sin in our lives that prevent us from being conformed to God's Will. A good way to start an examination of conscience is by praying Psalm 139, verse 23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."
- **Fasting and Prayer:** Fasting is a practice that has really gone by the wayside in many Christian circles. Yet, if done correctly, it can be a powerful time of renewing your relationship with God. Fasting can be found in both the Old Testament and the New, with Moses (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9,18), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), and our Lord (Matthew 4:2) all participating in 40-day fasts. Fasting is a way of denying ourselves the excesses of life so that we might be more attuned to the Lord's voice.

It is also a way of disciplining yourself, strengthening your "spiritual muscles" so to speak so that when temptations arise in life, you are already used to saying "no" to your desires. And finally, fasting is also a way of participating, in a small way, in the sufferings of Christ and can be particularly powerful when accompanied by prayer and confession.

- **Meditating on Christ's Sacrifice for Mankind:** In addition to periodic fasting and prayer, our scriptural meditations typically turn to the salvation offered to us through Christ's suffering. Read Old Testament Scriptures prophesying the suffering of Christ and the New Testament Gospel accounts.
- **Charity/Almsgiving:** A very important element of the Lenten season is becoming aware of not only the suffering and sacrifice of Christ but also to the suffering of others. Between now and Good Friday, choose one way you can increase your giving to those in need. It could be through extra financial offerings, donating goods you no longer need or use to charity, or increasing your personal time commitment to a ministry or cause close to your heart.

Lent is a time when Christians separate from the world; when we find out our faith is not just a feel-good, self-help religion but one that answers the deepest questions of life and eternity. Those who journey through the Lenten season will enter the Easter season with an increased appreciation for who God is and what He has done for us. And the joy of Resurrection, as well as the promises of eternity, will not be soon forgotten.

Bible Verses for Lent

Philippians 3:10-11 - "I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Joel 2:12-14 - "Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate.

Matthew 6:16-18 - "when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites...but when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

1 Peter 5:6 - Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,

A prayer for Lent ...

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the gift of this season. Thank you for knowing our hearts and our need for rhythms in our lives, and for drawing us into a deeper communion with you throughout the coming 40 days. Lord, it can be disheartening to read on Ash Wednesday that all come from dust, and to dust all return (Ecclesiastes 3:20), yet we know that there is more to our stories. We know that you created man and woman from the dust at the very beginning of time (Genesis 2:7) and that you breathed life into them to transform them into living creatures. We know that you are in the business of resurrection-- your very Son went to the cross to show us that no death is final and that ultimate transformation comes through your gift of salvation. Though we were made from dust, and our bodies will return to dust again, we can live in eternal glory with you through the blood of your Son. May we remember the gift of salvation in this season.

May these weeks leading up to the tragedy of Good Friday and the glory of Resurrection Sunday remind us of who you are, how you love us, and who you have created us to be as your followers. May we walk through this season intentionally, removing distractions that take our gaze away from your glory. May we quiet the noise that pulls us from adoration of you and puts our attention on lesser things. May we simplify where we have been stressed, may we surrender what has been burdensome, may we repent of what has been sinful, Lord Jesus.

May we see your goodness and your glory in new ways throughout this season of Lent. May we know the depths of your love for us more fully. May we feel the pain you endured for our sake, Jesus, and may we rejoice that you conquered every bit of evil when you rose to life again. Draw us closer to your heart, that we might know you better and understand you more completely. We pray that we would not only give things up for Lent, but that we would give you glory through Lent, Lord. May our actions reflect our hearts, and may we worship you through all that we say and do throughout the weeks to come.

Jesus, the journey you took to the cross was full of betrayal, grief, torture, and darkness, yet your love for us, your people, propelled you onward. Help us to comprehend just how powerful that love is, that you would suffer such a cruel death to make a way for us to be with you in glory forever. What a gift, Jesus. What a gift.

May our praise never cease in this season. May our worship be unending. May our love for you find new depths. May this season bring new hope and new healing. May we journey toward the cross prayerfully and purposefully, even through the pain, our doubt, our questions, and our searching. May we find resurrection life springing up from this old dusty ground, and may we be surprised by joy in all of it. May Easter be a day of complete celebration as we rejoice in our risen Savior and praise our gracious Father.

In you, we find the truest joy, Jesus.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. We praise you in all of it.

Hallelujah and amen.