
a beginner's guide to

Lent

— by Candice Lucey —

What Is Lent?

Many Christians have heard of Lent, but do all know what it means? According to Merriam-Webster, Lent means “the 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday to Easter observed by the Roman Catholic, Eastern, and some Protestant churches as a period of penitence and fasting.”

Between Ash Wednesday and Easter, many Christians observe a 40-day period known as Lent. This name comes from the “Old English *lencten* springtime, spring” and “from West Germanic *langitinaz* long-days or lengthening of the day.” Popularly regarded as a fasting period, there are many ways to make the Lenten period meaningful without missing meals. What is Lent and why should one take part? Does every participant follow a strict Lenten plan of rigid self-denial?

Meaning of Lent

Lent is meant to be a time of repentance. That’s not a feeling of shame but an awareness that sin separates us from God and of what it cost Him to be reunited with us. “Shame has its place, but feeling shame over sin is not the same thing as repentance from sin” because “our tempter can take our obedience to God and turn it into a source of pride.”

Repentant sinners “seek [...] cleansing from sin, but also freedom from shame.” True repentance leads” to a “180-degree change of



temptation. This was not the first fast; biblical figures often fasted when petitioning God for something important. “So we fasted and implored our God [...], and he listened to our entreaty” (Ezra 8:23). The Israelites “mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and for the nation of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword” (2 Samuel 1:12).

Before going to her husband to intercede for the Jews, Esther told Mordecai, “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do” (Esther 4:16). Jews and Christians have historically fasted to show repentance, to grieve particularly difficult trials, and to “seek God’s favor.”

While Protestants also take part, Catholic churches are particularly associated with Lent. No church history indicates the year when believers first took part in the tradition or what was required. Lenten fasting “has consisted of abstaining from all animal products” for some, but “for others, fish and/or poultry were allowed.” Certain societies have permitted “only bread” for a time. There were full-day fasts; half-day fasts; and the potential to pay money to be excused from participating.

What Does it Mean to Participate in Lent?

In other words, there are numerous ways to approach Lent, some more legalistic than devotional. Still, the origins of Lent seem to be rooted in Christians giving up food or money in order to emulate Christ’s obedience to the Father.

Community fasting provided accountability and support, but also led to pressure and judgment. Today, “some still observe fasts that restrict quantity and type of food,” but “many view Lent as a time in which to give up a particular vice, bad habit, or pleasurable thing.” In the 21st century, Christians frequently use the fasting season to motivate them to continue with New Year’s resolutions in a blend of secular and Christian observance.

Lent is also associated with Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, where “some Christians mark their foreheads with ash as a symbol of sorrow and mourning over their sin.”

“Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes” (Daniel 9:3).

“There was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes” (Esther 4:3).

“The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes” (Jonah 3:6).

Job 42 associates ashes with repentance, an association borne out over and over in scripture.

Reward of Lent

Greater intimacy with God is the reward of sacrifice. His love and one’s salvation are not reliant on denying oneself chocolate or beer, but idolatry stands in the way of worshipping the one true God. These 40 days are set aside to praise and worship the Lord; to read the Bible more, and to pray more often. Christians who observe Lent correctly anticipate deeper intimacy with the Lord, which is the blessing; they do not expect rewards such as more favorable answers to prayer or the resolution of health concerns, although many Christians have reported that, following Lent, they experience freedom from long-standing issues.

Many Christians prefer not to observe this pre-Easter tradition because it smacks of religious duty. Christ said of the Pharisees, “They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden” (Matthew 23:4). He often criticized the Pharisees for disheartening the Jews with demands that missed the heart of God. Christ did not establish the tradition of Lent as a commandment for followers to observe. Whether or not to participate is a matter between the individual and God.

What Are Your Motives?

“It is important to check one’s motives for observing Lent. Christ told the disciples “when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that others may see their fasting. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward” (Matthew 6:16). A small personal sacrifice should not be “a badge of pride.” The intent of a Lenten observance is to recognize our need for repentance and our depravity apart from God (1 John 1:9; Ephesians 2:1-5; Colossians 2:13), to draw closer to God, and to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Easter.”

Is Lent a matter of obedience to tradition or obedience to God? A means of achieving works-based salvation or of giving praise and thanks to Christ that He finished that work for eternity? A way to achieve a resolution or a means of growing closer to the Father?

Undertaking something difficult (giving to charity, serving the poor, abstaining from certain foods, memorizing Scripture) makes one feel needy and weak; humble: the perfect posture from which to approach God Almighty. For people whose lives are generally easy, Lent is a time to empathize better with those who genuinely go without luxuries or even simple needs. Lent can help establish a stronger sense of one’s need of God minute by minute and to develop a more disciplined, intimate, and authentic prayer life.

How to Practice Lent

1. Name the pressing sin. Christians are taught to begin the 40-day period by confessing sins they would like Christ to remove; to “really examine areas of recurring sin” which are a hurdle to “being conformed to God’s will.”

2. Partner with other Christians. Historically, entire church congregations would support one another during Lent. Although Christ instructed “when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret,” (Matthew 6:3-4), believers keep each other accountable. “Self-disclosure brings forth humility by making it your responsibility to humbly open your soul to those to whom you are accountable. [...] You are a witness to your own life, sharing truthfully, freely, and happily with little or no provocation.” Devoted friends encourage each other to be specific in their prayers and help one another seek Christ’s strength to stay the course.

3. One’s “fast” should feel like a sacrifice, but not religious duty. Nor should the fast be dangerous to one’s health. Consider giving up one meal a day, a regular treat, coffee, or alcohol. Other sacrifices include increased charitable giving, staying away from social media, service to the community, or memorizing scripture.

4. Time with God is critical. Quiet and solitude enable one to listen to the Spirit and discern

answers to prayer. Before the noisy corporate rejoicing of Easter Sunday, create opportunities for peaceful contemplation and intimacy with the Father. No matter how prayers are answered at the end of 40 days-no, yes, or wait-time with the Lord is cause for joy, praise, and thanks.

Christian Traditions of Lent

Prayer - Prayer accompanies fasting as a historic tradition of Lent. We should pray to improve our communion with God and strengthen our spiritual discipline during the preparation of Easter Sunday.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:41)

Fasting - Fasting is a well-known aspect of Lent, inspired by the fast of Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness. Christians partake in fasting to increase their self-control over worldly desires, such as food.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said
