

Recapturing the Spiritual Disciplines of the Lenten Season

Origin of the word “Lent”

The Teutonic word *Lent*, which we employ to denote the forty days' fast preceding Easter, originally meant no more than the *spring season*. Still it has been used from the Anglo-Saxon period to translate the more significant Latin term *quadragesima* (Fr. *carême*, It. *quaresima*, Span. *cuaresma*), meaning the "forty days", or more literally the "fortieth day". This in turn imitated the Greek name for Lent, *tessarakoste* (fortieth), a word formed on the analogy of Pentecost (*pentekoste*), which last was in use for the Jewish festival before New-Testament times. This etymology, as we shall see, is of some little importance in explaining the early developments of the Easter fast. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume IX*)

Why Forty Days?

Forty days is a traditional number of **discipline, devotion, and preparation** in the Bible. We see Moses stayed on the Mountain of God forty days (Exodus 24:18 and 34:28), the spies were in the land for forty days (Numbers 13:25), Elijah traveled forty days before he reached the cave where he had his vision (1 Kings 19:8), Nineveh was given forty days to repent (Jonah 3:4), and most importantly, prior to undertaking his ministry, Jesus spent forty days in wilderness praying and fasting (Matthew 4:2).

Most of the above have a positive association. Forty is also used with a negative connotation. It is often referred to as a number for “testing” cf. the Forty days flood and the Israelites spending forty years in the wilderness.

What is the Significance of Lent?

Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. It originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time, through concentrated prayer, study of the word of God and fasting, for Easter, when *the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism*. Also, this was the time *when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community*. By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days. It was a time of preparation for what was ahead of Him. We can use Lent for the same purpose.

Lent was therefore a time of individual and community preparation. It was most definitely a time for the entire families as well. In many respects, it was because of this time of preparation that Jesus was as victorious and successful as He was in His Life and Mission. All of us will do a lot better with a little preparation. It has often been said that “one minute spent in preparation will save at least five in execution.” Preparation is investment into the (our) future.

Today, Lent is marked by a time of **prayer and preparation**, including fasting, to celebrate Easter. Since Sundays celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the six Sundays that occur during Lent are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent, and are referred to as the **Sundays in Lent**. The number 40 is connected with many biblical events (see above), but especially with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry by facing the temptations that could have

lead him to abandon His mission and calling. Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self-examination, repentance and to be strengthened by the spiritual disciplines.

Here is a web site with some Helpful Hints on Fasting: [Seven Basic Steps to Successful Fasting \(http://www.ccci.org/7steps/\)](http://www.ccci.org/7steps/)

Lent begins on **Ash Wednesday**. We skip Sundays when we count the forty days, because Sundays commemorate the Resurrection. Thus, in 2002, Lent begins on 13 February and ends on 30 March.

Ash Wednesday, the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the season of Lent. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers' heads or foreheads as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. (*For the question as to whether we need ashes today, see the endnote.*)¹

In Lent, it's traditional to give up something(s) that we do a lot of and that we find pleasure in. This 'giving up' is done as a discipline, as a reminder of Christ's sufferings and what our true pleasures are as followers of Christ. Sometimes we don't notice how certain things we do have gained power over us and dictate our actions. In Lent, we discover these things and give them up so that God can be in charge.

Suggested To make the Experience More Meaningful:

Introduction:

Study the Life of Jesus or an aspect of His Life: (Take a manageable portion, theme, topic, etc.) "Quality before quantity" is a good rule.

Remember: Lent is an Observance of Forty Days of Spiritual Discipline:

The Evangelical focus on Lent should be positive. It should not only be "giving up" (subtraction). It should also be "putting on" (addition) also. Remember there is often no intrinsic value in giving-up only. Nature abhors a vacuum. Sometimes "giving up" without "adding" puts us in a worst situation than we were before. . Read: *Matt 12:43-45*.

Do as much as you want or as little as you want. Remember the "**Law of Proportionate Return**"; we get what we put into anything - especially into life. We reap what we sow.

- ✓ **Have a Goal** – What do I want to accomplish?
- ✓ **Have a Plan and a Strategy** – How will I accomplish this goal?
- ✓ **Have a Measurement** – How will I know I have hit the mark?

Things to Do (The Minimum):

- ✓ **Read your Bible** and meditate on a portion of Scripture – Let God speak to you through his word
- ✓ **Pray:** Talk to God – About yourself, your situation, others
- ✓ **Keep a Diary of your Spiritual Journey** through Lent (Journaling)
- ✓ **Read your Diary entry of the previous day** and ask God to build on your previous experience
- ✓ **Obey God**

Others Suggestions:

- ✓ Read one of the Gospels
- ✓ Read the Psalms (or certain of the Psalms)
- ✓ Use your Hymn Book and Meditate on the Hymns of the Life and Ministry of Jesus
- ✓ During Holy Week focus on the Hymns that deals with **His Death**
- ✓ On Easter Sunday focus on the Hymns that tell us about **the Resurrection**
- ✓ Read through the **Book of Hebrews** – This is an excellent explanation of what Jesus did on the Cross. Jesus was a fulfillment of the Law of the Old Testament.

A Time to Increase Our Spirituality and Grow in Grace and the Knowledge of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2Pet 3:18):

Remember: Lent is really a forty-day period of prayer, repentance, and spiritual exercises in preparation for the proper celebration of Easter.

Lent can be a time of “new beginnings” for us. It can be a time to break “bad” habits and start new ones. It’s been often said that “the best way to get rid of a bad habit is to replace it with a good one.”

It can be a time of spiritual discipline that continues after Lent.

Start on **Ash Wednesday** with a study of the Baptism & Temptation of Jesus (Matt 4:1-11).

Maybe on the day before Ash Wednesday, you would want to look at the Baptism of Jesus and reflect on your own relationship with God (Matthew 3:13-17; Rom 6:1-10). **Make sure that you have a relationship with God through Jesus** (Jn 14:6; 1:12). Assurance of our relationship (Salvation) is essential to our spiritual well being and development.

Here is a web site to help you if you are not sure of your relationship with God: **[Four Spiritual Laws](http://www.greatcom.org/laws/english/)** (<http://www.greatcom.org/laws/english/>).

Choose one particular area of your life that you want to improve on and ask God to help you as you do your part. For some it might be something physical; for others something emotional or even spiritual. Whatever it is, you can be victorious. The Bible has a word even for physical exercises (1Tim 4:8).

Use your Imagination and Creativity (I will be delighted to explore the possibilities and potentials of what you are thinking about)

Meditation on the Passion of Christ:

1. The Last Supper (Matt 26:17-30; Jn 13:1-17)
2. The Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46)
3. The Crucifixion (John 19:1-42)

For **Holy Week**, study the accounts leading up to the Crucifixion and the Resurrection:

Source: <http://www.rc.net/wcc/readings>

Gospel of Mark

Mark 14:1-11 Extravagant Love
Mark 14:12-21 Passover Preparation
Mark 14:22-25 Jesus' Last Supper

Mark 14:26-42 Agony in the Garden
 Mark 14:43-52 Jesus' arrest
 Mark 14:53-72 Jesus' Trial & Peter's Denial
 Mark 15:1-20 Jesus before Pilate
 Mark 15:21-32 Jesus Crucified
 Mark 15:33-41 Jesus' Death
 Mark 15:42-47 Jesus' Burial
 Mark 16:1-13 Empty Tomb & Resurrection
 Mark 16:14-20 Jesus' Great Commission

Here is a plan for **Reading through the Entire Gospel of Mark** during Lent:

The Gospel According to Mark	
1. Mark 1.1-13	22. Mark 10:17-31
2. Mark 14-39	23. Mark 10:32-52
3. Mark 1.40-2.12	24. Mark 11:1-19
4. Mark 2.13-3:6	25. Mark 11:20-33
5. Mark 3.7-19	26. Mark 12:1-12
6. Mark 3.20-35	27. Mark 12:13-27
7. Mark 4.1-20	28. Mark 12:28-44
8. Mark 4.21-41	29. Mark 13:1-13
9. Mark 5.1-20	30. Mark 13:14-31
10. Mark 5.21-43	31. Mark 13:32-37
11. Mark 6.1-13	32. Mark 14:1-11 Anointing at Bethany
12. Mark 6.14-29	33. Mark 14:12-26 The Last Supper
13. Mark 6.30-44	34. Mark 14:27-31 Peter Denial of Jesus is Predicted
14. Mark 6.45-56	35. Mark 14:32-42 Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane
15. Mark 7:1-23	36. Mark 14:43-65 Jesus is Arrested and Is Brought Before the Sanhedrin
16. Mark 7:24-37	37. Mark 14:66-15:5 Peter Denied Jesus and Jesus is Before Pilate
17. Mark 8:1-26	38. Mark 15:6-20 Jesus is Condemned and Barabbas is Freed
18. Mark 8:27-9:1	39. Mark 15:21-41 The Crucifixion of Jesus
19. Mark 9:2-32	40. Mark 15:42-47 The Burial Of Jesus
20. Mark 9:33-50	41. Mark 16:1-8 The Resurrection of Jesus
21. Mark 10:1-16	42. Mark 16:9-20 The Great Commission

Why should we take the Time and invest the Effort in this Exercise?

Here are some Scriptures on the Motives and the Methods:

A Promise:

2Chronicles 7:12-17, especially v. 14

if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

- Forgiveness, Healing and Prosperity

A Plan:

Joel 2:12-17, 23-27

12 `Even now, ` declares the LORD, `return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.`
13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.
14 Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.
16 Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.
17 Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, `Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, `Where is their God?` 18 Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people. 23 Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness.^[1] He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.
24 The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.
25 `I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten-- the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm^[2] -- my great army that I sent among you. 26 You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. 27 Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. 28 `And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

- Repentance, Restoration and Revival

A Pattern:

Matt 6:1-18

Practicing Generosity:

1 "Be careful not to do your `acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Practicing Prayer:

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 "This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us today our daily bread.

12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.^[1]

14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Practicing Fasting:

16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

18 so that it will not be obvious to men 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.

- Generosity, Integrity, Intensity and Humility

ⁱ *Do we need to use ashes today? We see in the Bible that ashes was associated with mourning, particularly in connection with fasting – which was an act of humbling oneself before God. We see this practice in the Book of Job (Job 2:8, 12; 30:19) and the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4-20). Because we have experienced the reality of the Gospel, we do not need ashes. The Lord promised to give us “beauty instead of ashes and the oil of gladness instead of mourning “ (Isa 61:1-3). We have the “blood of Jesus on our foreheads”; we don’t need dust and ashes. If we do things that displeases God; we do not have to mourn for our sins in the sense of doing penance. We need to confess it and claim forgiveness (1John 1:9). The question is often asked, how sorry do I have to be? How much do I have to mourn before God forgives me? The answer is no amount of mourning can bring about the forgiveness of sins. It is only the blood of Jesus that can cleanse us (1John 1:7). We need to be careful that we do not practice a ritual without the reality. The ritual is only effective when we have experienced the reality.*