

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LENT? – BIBLICAL MEANING AND PURPOSE

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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 [...] direction," requires "true brokenness," but repentance starts with "regretful acknowledgment of sin with commitment to change."

That is why conflating Lent with New Year's resolutions is dangerous. This time of fasting should not add religious encouragement to a difficult goal: to lose weight, stop watching pornography, or to give money to charity. "Lent is [...] an opportunity to contemplate what our Lord really did for us on the Cross."

Resolutions focus on meeting self-set, self-motivated goals rather than goals established by God and may even rebel against His purposes. Resolutions reflect a desire for autonomy from God instead of recognizing that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19) and the work of the potter, to be regarded as precious).

Resolutions simply focus on "self," not Christ. Lent is a good time to give up one's own resolutions and listen for God's leading. Where God leads might be more difficult than any fast, and, here, Christians realize that they cannot do anything in their own strength either: only the grace of God is sufficient.

The History of Lent

Christians honor the 40 days and nights following Christ's baptism when He went into the wilderness without water and food and was tempted by Satan. During that time, Christ did what we do today when we fast: wrestle with 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". 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".

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". 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 in order 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.

There was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

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 worshiping 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 that "They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden". 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 some kind of commandment for followers to observe. Choosing to participate or not 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 their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward". 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, 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," 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.

10 PRAYERS FOR LENT

1. Lent Prayer for Strength and Guidance

Lord God Almighty, shaper and ruler of all creatures, we pray for your great mercy, that you guide us towards you, for we cannot find our way.

And guide us to your will, to the need of our soul, for we cannot do it ourselves. And make our mind steadfast in your will and aware of our soul's need.

Strengthen us against the temptations of the devil, and remove from us all lust and every unrighteousness, and shield us against our foes, seen and unseen.

Teach us to do your will, that we may inwardly love you before all things with a pure mind. For you are our maker and our redeemer, our help, our comfort, our trust, our hope; praise and glory be to you now and forever.

2. Protect from Any Temptation

O Christ, Son of God, for our sake you fasted forty days and allowed yourself to be tempted. Protect us so that we may not be led astray by any temptation. Since man does not live by bread alone, nourish our souls with the heavenly food of your Word; through your mercy, O our God, you are blessed and live and govern all things, now and forever. Amen.

3. Lent Prayer for Strength and Protection

Lord God, heavenly Father, you know that we are set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant us such strength and protection, to support us in all danger, and carry us through all temptations; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

4. Lent Prayer for God to bring beauty from ashes:

Dear God,

In this season of Lent, we're reminded of our own difficulties and struggles. Sometimes the way has seemed too dark. Sometimes we feel like our lives have been marked by such grief and pain, we don't see how our circumstance can ever change. But in the midst of our weakness, we ask that you would be strong on our behalf. Lord, rise up within us, let your Spirit shine out of every broken place we've walked through. Allow your power to be manifest through our own weakness, so that others will recognize it is You who is at work on our behalf. We ask that you would trade the ashes of our lives for the beauty of your Presence. Trade our mourning and grief for the oil of joy and gladness from your Spirit. Trade our despair for hope and praise. We choose to give you thanks today and believe that this season of darkness will fade away. Thank you that you are with us in whatever we face and that you are greater than this trial. We know and recognize that you are Sovereign, we thank you for the victory that is ours because of Christ Jesus, and we are confident that you have good still in store for our future. We thank you that you are at work right now, trading our ashes for greater beauty. We praise you, for you make all things new. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

5. Lead Us to Love You Sincerely

O Lord Jesus Christ, by your almighty power you opened the eyes of the blind, and showed yourself to them. Turn our eyes away from worthless things, and lead us to love you sincerely; through your mercy,

O our God, you are blessed, and live and govern all things, now and forever. Amen.

6. Lent Prayer for a Clean Heart

Create a clean heart in me, O God: a humble heart, a meek heart, a peaceful heart, a benevolent heart, a devout heart which does evil to no one, which does not repay evil for evil, but overcomes evil with good, which loves you above all things, thinks always about you, speaks about you, gives you thanks, delights in hymns and spiritual songs, and has its citizenship in heaven. Amen.

7. Defend Us from All Enemies

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayer and stretch forth the right hand of your majesty to defend us from all enemies that rise up against us; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

8. Lent Prayer for Strength

O God, you see that we have no strength in ourselves. Keep us both outwardly and inwardly. Defend us from all adversities which hurt the body, and cleanse us from all evil thoughts which afflict the mind; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

9. Lent Prayer for Defense

Almighty God, look on the humble desires of your servants. Stretch forth the right hand of your majesty and be our sure defense; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

10. Lent Prayer for the Comfort of God's Grace

Almighty God, grant that we who deserve to be afflicted for our evil deeds may mercifully be relieved by the comfort of your grace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This was compiled from a couple locations of the internet by Deacon Jim Multeri.