

***Bringing You  
Closer to God  
His Love and Peace  
And Eternal Life***

**Do You Celebrate Easter?  
If So Do You Also Celebrate Lent  
To Honor What Jesus Did  
That Led to the Celebration of Easter?**

***LENT***

***Is Lent a Season  
To Be Celebrated  
To Honor Jesus Christ?***

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# LENT

## ***The Meaning of Lent***

*adapted from "On Keeping A Holy Lent", Craig R. Higgins, Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA), Rye, NY*

People from different religious backgrounds have very different reactions to the season of Lent. Some grow up in churches where Lent is observed, but with little to no real explanation. Whether observed as a time of strict austerity or merely as a time of forgoing a few simple pleasures, Lent may seem like an empty, meaningless ritual in such cases. On the other hand, some grow up in church traditions where Lent is not observed at all. These folks may think of Lenten observance as, at best, a hollow custom, or, at worst, quite foreign to authentic Christianity. As a matter of fact, many who grew up in the church have the same question as those who didn't: "What *is* Lent, anyway?"

### **What is Lent, Anyway?**

Lent's origin is hidden in the early centuries of church history, but we do know that it originated as a time of preparation for Easter. From the church's earliest days, the resurrection of Christ was celebrated not only each week (on Sunday, the Lord's Day), but also in a special festival of the resurrection. This festival we call Easter Day, and it is celebrated as the Sunday of Sundays!

Lent, as a season of preparation, is traditionally focused on repentance. Speaking biblically, to repent means to make a change in our attitudes, words, and lifestyles. As 16th century reformer Martin Luther taught, the Christian life in its totality is a life of repentance. Beginning when we first trust Christ, and continuing throughout our lives, we are more and more turning away from sin and self-centeredness and more and more turning to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Even though a repentant spirit should mark all we do, it is still appropriate that certain times be set aside for a particular focus on repentance.

In much the same way, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ each Sunday, but especially at Easter; and while we should always thank God for the Incarnation, we especially celebrate it at Christmas. These periodic reminders keep us from becoming forgetful and imbalanced. The church has traditionally done this at the Lenten season (and, to a lesser extent, in the pre-Christmas season of Advent). Lent, therefore, is a time for focusing on the heart, a time for asking questions about our spiritual health:

- *What are my characteristic sins, and how can I pray for change?*
- *What idols have captured my imagination so that my love for the living God has grown cold?*
- *In what ways is my devotion to Christ and His church less than wholehearted?*

The Lenten season is the spiritual equivalent of an annual physical exam; it's a time to take stock of our lives, our hearts. Keeping Lent, however, is potentially dangerous, precisely because of this focus on the heart. After all, it is much easier to read a book on prayer than to spend time leisurely speaking with our heavenly Father. It is much easier to fast from certain foods than it is to turn from idols of the heart. It is much easier to write a check than to spend time in ministries of mercy.

Consequently, Lent is easily trivialized. The point of Lent is not to give up chocolate; it's to give up sin! Even with this warning, however, we need to beware of going from one extreme to the other. Yes, it is possible to completely *externalize* your Lenten observance that you end up trivializing it. Yet we need to remember that we are not purely spiritual beings. God created humans as *physical* beings; we are psychosomatic creatures, a "nexus of body and soul." What we do physically has an effect on us spiritually—and we neglect this principle to our peril.

For example, it is unquestionably true that our attitude in prayer is more important than our posture in prayer. However, sometimes being in a physical posture of humility—kneeling in prayer—helps us get in the right frame of mind. It shouldn't surprise us in the least that there is a connection between the physical and spiritual; it simply reflects how God created us. That's why, at the center of Christian worship, God gave us the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper— simple physical rites involving water, bread, and wine, but rites that communicate to us the most profound of spiritual realities.

That's also why, in the pages of Scripture and throughout the history of the church, we find many physical acts and postures designed to help us worship, to help us pray, to help us in our spiritual growth. The list could be quite long, such as standing for prayer and praise, the laying on of hands, anointing the sick with oil, bowing one's head and closing one's eyes for prayer. Recognizing this God-created link between the physical and the spiritual, the Lenten season has historically included a physical element, specifically fasting and other acts of self-denial. We'll deal with these more fully below.

## Should We Observe Lent?

I am sometimes asked why churches should observe Lent at all. Well, I certainly agree that of all the seasons of the church year Lent is the most-often trivialized. Consequently, many churches (including some Presbyterian churches) do not observe the season. There are, however, two good reasons for keeping this tradition:

First, this is a *wise* tradition. Realizing that repentance should characterize the totality of the Christian life, we should see the practical wisdom in setting aside time especially for this purpose. Just as a baseball player may work at staying in shape year round but still give special attention to conditioning before the start of spring training, so we may find great spiritual benefits in setting aside a few weeks to give special attention to the state of our souls.

Second, it is right that we *honor* the traditional wisdom of the church, and Lent is a tradition that the church has observed for centuries. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has been present throughout church history, guiding God's people into an ever-increasing awareness of biblical truth, we believe that it is foolhardy to disregard history and constantly to try to "reinvent the wheel." We dishonor our spiritual ancestors when we casually disregard their wisdom.

Are Christians required to observe Lent? Strictly speaking, no; Presbyterians have long emphasized that our consciences are bound to Scripture alone, and there is no biblical mandate to celebrate Lent. But countless generations of Christians have found this a helpful tool.

## When is Lent?

The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts until the Saturday before Easter Day. The last week of Lent is called Holy Week, which includes both Maundy Thursday (commemorating the institution of the Eucharist) and Good Friday (commemorating the crucifixion of our Lord). Reminiscent of Jesus' fasting for forty days in the wilderness, the Lenten season, not counting Sundays, lasts forty days. Sundays are not included because the Lord's Day, according to church tradition, is never a fast day but always a *feast* day—a celebration of the resurrection! Therefore, during Lent the Lord's Days are listed as Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent.

## How Can I Keep Lent?

Traditionally, the Lenten season is observed in four basic (and often overlapping) ways:

### **1.) Self-Examination**

As we've discussed, this is central to the traditional Lenten observance. Use this time to ask yourself some hard questions about your spiritual life, your spiritual maturity. The following questions taken from *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, by Jack Miller, are a great place to start:

- *Is God working in your life?*
- *Have you been repenting of your sin lately?*
- *Are you building your life on Christ's free justification or are you insecure and guilt-ridden?*
- *Have you done anything simply because you love Jesus?*
- *Have you stopped anything simply because you love Jesus?*

If you're married, ask your spouse to give you his or her evaluation of your spiritual health. Many Christians have a Christian friend, or a small group of fellow believers, who provide an opportunity for spiritual inquiry. If you don't have these kinds of relationship, Lent might be a good time to initiate one. Parents—especially fathers—could use Lent as time to spend more time with their children individually, trying to understand their particular spiritual struggles and providing them encouragement.

With all this emphasis on self-examination, however, it is crucial to keep your focus on the *Gospel*: All of us are more sinful and helpless than we would've ever dared admit, yet in Christ we are more accepted and forgiven than we would've ever dared hope. Be careful that your self-examination is centered on this Good News. There is always the danger of falling into morbid introspection, which can lead to despair over your own spiritual health and to a harsh legalism toward others.

### **2.) Self-Denial**

The Lenten season traditionally is also a time for acts of self-discipline and self-denial, a time to remind ourselves that we do not live by bread alone. Self-denial helps us remember what is so beautifully signified in the Eucharist—that Jesus is the true bread of life, our only source of strength and sustenance.

The two major fast days of the traditional church year—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—both occur during the Lenten season. Traditionally, the other days of Lent—except Sundays, of course—are marked by other acts of self-denial. Some common examples would be giving up one meal a day or giving up a particular food. Self-denial, however, doesn't always involve what we eat; some people may work on other habits, seeking to better use their time. (I've known some people to fast from watching too much television!) For families in this dangerously frenetic culture, Lent would certainly be an appropriate time to cut back on the seemingly-endless flow of activities and spend time worshipping, praying, and learning together.

Since fasting is so unfamiliar to many in our culture, it is wise to consult with a pastor or other spiritual leader before making any decisions in this area. (Some people, of course—such as expectant or nursing mothers, the sick, and those on special diets—should not fast.) Before you begin fasting, I would recommend that you look at what the Scriptures say about the practice (see especially Matthew 6), and perhaps get some guidance from good books on the subject. And again, remember that there is nothing magical in these spiritual disciplines; they are tools to help you grow closer to Christ.

### **3.) Acts of Compassion**

The Lenten season is a particularly appropriate time to ask God to fill you with compassion for the poor and oppressed and to put this into practice in concrete ways. This can take many practical forms. For example, there are Christians who give up one meal a day as a Lenten discipline, and then give the money they've saved by doing so to the poor. Many churches—including West End Presbyterian Church—have Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday offerings for ministries of mercy, so money saved during Lent could be given at that time. There are many ways in which families can practice compassion during Lent. In your neighborhood, there may be a poor family you could help (with or without drawing attention to yourselves). Or maybe you know an older person who lives alone who could use some help around the house—or would simply like having a friend. Some families save their loose change or forgo some simple expenditures, then give the money to the poor. Lent can be an excellent opportunity to teach our children the value of compassion.

### **4.) Using the Means of Grace**

Finally, the Lenten season is a time for renewing our focus on the means of grace—a focus that all-too-easily fades when not given adequate attention. Historically, the church has said there are three means of grace—three instruments through which God helps us grow to be more and more like Christ: the Scriptures, prayer, and the sacraments. If regular times of prayer and Bible study have never been a part of your life (or if they once were but have become less so), then Lent is a wonderful opportunity to begin these life-changing practices.

The Lenten season would also be a good time to get involved in a Bible study group—a practice that generations of Christians have commended as key to their spiritual growth. And if your family doesn't have a time of worship together, Lent is a great time to start—and then keep going the rest of the year! In our individualistic culture, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that Christianity is a *communal* faith, that the center of Christian life is not private religious devotion but corporate worship, gathering with fellow believers to sing, pray, and receive Holy Communion. There are many today who identify themselves as Christians but for whom the church is peripheral and tangential. If this sounds like you, then use this Lenten season to commit yourself to the community of God's people. If you are a follower of Christ and yet have never been baptized, then make every effort to be baptized as soon as possible. If you have been baptized, remember that in baptism you were incorporated into a community, the family of God, and that you are to join in the family meal, the Lord's Supper. And parents, the Lenten season is a wonderful time to help your children realize that the church is their family, that worship is their first duty and greatest joy. And if your children understand the Gospel, then this season could be a wonderful time to take the steps toward having them admitted to the Lord's Table. As Lent begins this year, our prayer for you is that this would be a truly blessed season, a time of genuine and significant spiritual growth for you and for your family.

## **Lent Bible Verses**

Bible Verses About Lent - The time of Lent 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 (this year, falling on March 1st).

The below scriptures will help you focus on repentance and reflection during the season of Lent. Use this time to grow in your faith as you think upon all that Jesus Christ has done for you!

Read the history and traditions behind Lent included when and how it started, and how many Christians celebrate it today - What is Lent?

Use our Bible verses by topic page to quickly find scriptures about popular topics.

Joel 2:12-14 – <sup>12</sup> “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

Matthew 6:16-18 - <sup>16</sup> “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> 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.

Philippians 3:10-11 - <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

1 Peter 5:6 - <sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Mark 1:12-15 - <sup>12</sup> At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, <sup>13</sup> and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. <sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Isaiah 58:6-7 - <sup>6</sup> “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Mark 9:2-10 - <sup>2</sup> After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. <sup>3</sup> His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup> (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” <sup>8</sup> Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. <sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.

Luke 13:3 - <sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Ezekiel 18:21 – <sup>21</sup> “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die.

John 17:17 - <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

John 12 - <sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, <sup>5</sup> “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages. ” <sup>6</sup> He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. <sup>7</sup> “Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” <sup>9</sup> Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, <sup>11</sup> for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him. <sup>12</sup> The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! ” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the king of Israel!” <sup>14</sup> Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: <sup>15</sup> “Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.” <sup>16</sup> At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him. <sup>17</sup> Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. <sup>18</sup> Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. <sup>19</sup> So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!” <sup>20</sup> Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup> Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. <sup>25</sup> Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. <sup>27</sup> “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup> The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. <sup>30</sup> Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup> He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. <sup>34</sup> The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?” <sup>35</sup> Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. <sup>36</sup> Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.” When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. <sup>37</sup> Even after Jesus had performed so many

signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.<sup>38</sup> This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: “Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”<sup>39</sup> For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:<sup>40</sup> “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.”<sup>41</sup> Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.<sup>42</sup> Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue;<sup>43</sup> for they loved human praise more than praise from God.<sup>44</sup> Then Jesus cried out, “Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me.<sup>45</sup> The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.<sup>46</sup> I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.<sup>47</sup> “If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.<sup>48</sup> There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day.<sup>49</sup> For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.<sup>50</sup> I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

Joel 2:1-2 - <sup>1</sup> Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—<sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.

Matthew 11:21 - <sup>21</sup> “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

Psalms 91 - <sup>1</sup> Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.<sup>2</sup> I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”<sup>3</sup> Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.<sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.<sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,<sup>6</sup> nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.<sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.<sup>8</sup> You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.<sup>9</sup> If you say, “The LORD is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling,<sup>10</sup> no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.<sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;<sup>12</sup> they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.<sup>13</sup> You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.<sup>14</sup> “Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.<sup>15</sup> He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.<sup>16</sup> With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

Mark 7:7-9 - <sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’<sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”<sup>9</sup> And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!

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