

## LENT

### The Origin and Purpose of Lent

**E**ASTER, the Day of the Resurrection, is the most important celebration of the Church. From the beginning, the Church observed a period of fasting before Easter to prepare for the feast. This season of fasting was eventually lengthened to forty days to correspond to the forty day fasts in the Bible: The fast of Jesus in the wilderness before he was tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1), the fast of Moses on Mt. Sinai while he was receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28), and the fast of Elijah when he fled from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:8).

The Sundays of Lent are not counted as days of fasting; it is forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter if we do not count the Sundays. The church observes Sunday perpetually as the Day of Resurrection. The lenten Sundays are properly observed with a slight relaxation—but not a total elimination—of the fast.

### The Danger of Lent

People talk about what they will “give up” for Lent. This can become a competitive and prideful thing; a mere religious activity without aim or goal for others. The purpose of Lent is to bring us closer to God. The discipline of fasting helps us to detach ourselves from things so that we can increase our prayer and our experience of God’s presence in our lives. Apart from this goal of spiritual growth, the things we “give up” for Lent will profit us nothing. The Bible warns us about the unprofitable nature of fasting when it is practiced wrongly (see Isaiah 58:3-5 and Matthew 6:16). Thus, before considering what you will fast from, first identify your current areas of temptation and struggle, and link your fast to prayers for growth in these areas.

### Guidelines for Lent

Our observance of Lent should also reflect our spiritual maturity. Some people have been observing Lent for decades, while other may be observing their first Lent. Adopt a Lenten Rule that is appropriate for your current spiritual state.

The general rule for Lent is to “eat less and exercise more.” We decrease our intake of food, pleasure, and entertainment and increase our practice of spiritual disciplines. The tradition of the church provides us with guidelines for our Lenten practice. Each day consists of one full meal and two smaller portions of food. Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent are days of abstinence from flesh meat. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of complete fasting. No food is eaten until sundown. Medical issues and age are reasons to moderate the fast of food. If you struggle with an eating disorder, seek professional guidance in observing the fast of food.

We may abstain from specific foods, pleasures and entertainments for the forty days. Consumption of alcohol and desserts should be eliminated or reduced. It is essential that the lenten fast include computer, electronics, phone, and media, which occupy too much space in almost everyone's life. The goal is to become less attached to things and create an atmosphere of silence and stillness that is conducive to prayer.

### **Why Fast?**

As the hunger and desire created by the fast is directed towards God in prayer, we learn the spiritual truth of John 6:35, "He who comes to me shall never hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst." We also fast to gain control of our appetites. As we practice abstaining from things, we develop self-control. Pleasure is good when it is sought within the will of God; but we are only free to enjoy things from which we are also free to abstain. Fasting develops the ability to say "no" and, thus, the ability to say "yes" in the right way. Self-control is one fruit of fasting. As Jesus said, "Your Father who sees [your fasting] in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:18).

### **Prayer**

As we turn away from things, we open up room in our lives for a greater experience of God's presence and power. We live the Christian life by God's grace. Grace comes into our lives through prayer. If we want to draw closer to God, we must necessarily increase our practice of prayer. Those who already practice the discipline of Morning and Evening Prayer (the "daily offices") might add time for silence, meditation, or conversational prayer. Those who do not now practice the discipline of the daily offices might pray one or both for the forty days of the season. Some form of noon day prayer can also be helpful.

Some practice of stillness and silence is essential for the development of our prayer. We live in a noisy and distracted world. Many people never experience any space in which there is not some kind of external noise. A good Lenten Rule includes some period of quiet. The habit of taking a daily walk (without one's phone) in some natural setting can help to cultivate the experience of interior stillness.

### **Bible Reading**

God reveals his will to us through Holy Scripture. Too often, attitudes and opinions are formed by the internet article, the radio commentator, or the T.V. show rather than by the word of God. If we want to hear the voice of God, we must develop the habit and skill of letting him speak to us through his word. The Book of Common Prayer contains a lectionary with readings for

each day of the year. It begins on page x and ends on page xlv. The lessons for Lent begin with Ash Wednesday on page xvi and xvii. These lessons are meant to be read in the context of Morning and Evening Prayer, but they can also be read separately. Reading through one or more of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke or John—can be an excellent Lenten discipline.

### **Confession**

As we fast we ought to consider what is going on in our relationship with Christ and what sort of changes ought to be made. A good confession does not focus on every little bad habit. Surface behaviors often mask deeper problems within us. The best confession is the fruit of prayer. We should ask God to reveal to us what is wrong in our lives. Lent is a good time to ask and listen for an extended season. The purpose of confession is forgiveness and change. As St. John writes, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

### **Good Works**

The result of confession and forgiveness is new behavior—"fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8) or "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22). Good works are things we do for the benefit of others because we are motivated by the love of Christ. Lent is a time to reconcile with others with whom we may have conflicts. Lent is a time for renewed response to the needs we see around us. Lent is a time to consider how God is calling us to use our gifts in ministry. Our good works are the evidence that God is working in us. The Holy Spirit makes us less self-centered and more responsive to the needs of others.

### **Spiritual Direction**

Spiritual direction is essentially "coaching." Often we get stuck in the spiritual life because we caught up in our own anxious thoughts and habits. Getting input from someone else who can look at our life and prayer more objectively can help us to break through barriers and grow in new ways. We can get spiritual help from clergy or lay people with experience in spiritual direction, but we can also benefit from spiritual conversations with mature Christians who have been practicing the life of prayer for a longer time. The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. Lent is an opportunity to get help from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Lent is a season of opportunity given to us by the church to turn from self towards God and experience in greater measure the joy of Easter.