

# A Season of Renewal

## THE ORIGIN OF LENT

The word “Lent” comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “spring”, and it is the season of the church calendar prior to Easter. Though various denominations and traditions calculate the days of Lent differently, the season itself was meant to commemorate Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the wilderness when he fasted for forty days (Matt 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). Having become the link between Jesus’ baptism and resurrection, the ancient church employed this season to prepare new believers for their new life in Christ and their baptism which would be administered on Easter Sunday.

You may be asking why Lent begins on Wednesday and not the following Tuesday which is the actual fortieth day before Easter? Lent, in Western traditions begins on Wednesday because Sundays are not counted among the fast days. This side of the resurrection, Sunday is a feast day, and though we honor and remember Christ’s fast in the wilderness, we must never forget the victory he fully accomplished there and on the cross. So, technically, Lent begins forty-six days prior to Easter and still lasts forty days because the six Sundays which fall in Lent are not counted.

## THE PRACTICE OF LENT

Because Lent honors Jesus’ fast in the Wilderness, the traditional church has always observed Lent by fasting. You may have heard a friend mention that they were giving something up for Lent; this self-denial is, in some measure, a fast of that thing: a food, convenience, etc.... When one fasts, they should not think of it as a payment or as a means to curry favor with God — we have the Spirit of sonship (Galatians 4:6); we cannot get closer to his love. Rather, the discipline of the fast is intended to help us focus more intently on his mercy and goodness, and in so doing to open ourselves up to the examination of the Holy Spirit who knows and searches our hearts (Psalm 139).

## THE ASHES OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Traditionally, Ash Wednesday is celebrated by the smearing (imposition) of ashes upon the forehead or hand of the worshipper by the pastor in the sign of the cross. The ashes are made with the burnt remains of the palms used during the previous year’s Palm Sunday service. Though we will not be imposing ashes at our service, the connection between ashes and humility are both important and biblical.

## The Ash of Humility and Repentance

Firstly, ashes symbolize humility and repentance. Ashes and dust are always symbols of humility and mourning. The Bible says that we are made of dust which tells us that our frame is frail and our life, fragile. We will not last. Our bodies are made of weak stuff, and they will return to that weak stuff when we die.

In order to acknowledge and confess that weakness, someone who mourned a death, sorrowed over sin, grieved broken promises, would often cover their heads with ashes and lie in the dust. One example of this occurs in the book of Job.

At the end of the book, after Job had complained to the Lord for his seeming disregard of Job’s cause and life, the Lord questioned Job and revealed himself to Job. Job’s response to God’s revelation of himself is recorded in Job 42:1-6 which flows out of a righted understand of the Lord and his character—one which is both holy and righteous, and patient and merciful. As we celebrate Lent, we ask that the Lord would reveal himself to us, that we would come to know him better, and that our lives would reflect his character.

<sup>1</sup> *Then Job replied to the LORD: <sup>2</sup> "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. <sup>3</sup> You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. <sup>4</sup> "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' <sup>5</sup> My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. <sup>6</sup> Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*

Job 42:1-6

## The Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Secondly, we want a heart transformation—a healing from within that works itself out in our life. And so the **fast of Lent is a hungering and thirsting for righteousness.**

In ancient Israel, as with us today, outward duties or behaviors can become disconnected from the inward realities. We can perform duties without loving the one we are serving. This was the case during the days of Joel and Isaiah.

In response to Israel’s mourning over God’s judgment, the people tore their robes as a display of the regret and sorrow. But the Lord saw through their actions: they were merely acting sorry, but they were not truly grieved for their sin — like the person who is more sorry they got caught than sorry for what they had done. And so in response to the tearing of robes, the Lord said through Joel, “Rend your heart and not your garments!” That is don’t merely display the outward form of re-

pentance, but first work inwardly. **During Lent, we want to work our repentance inwardly.**

In Isaiah, the people of Israel thought that their works of religious devotion would move God to show them compassion, but as with Joel, they weren’t moving towards God, they weren’t *loving* him rather they were *using* him. For Israel, God was a means to get what they really loved: prosperity, security, respect, a trouble-free existence.... Sound familiar?

God asked, if you are devoted to me, why do you not devote yourselves to the things I do? Why do you not love the weak? the oppressed? the downtrodden? Why do you not live justly?

As we celebrate Lent, we want to be careful that we seek God and not only behave as if we are seeking him. We want to be about those things he loves: mercy and justice, and we do it for his glory and not our own.

## The Promise of New Life

<sup>5</sup> *Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? <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 him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

Isaiah 58:5-7

Lastly, we lean into the season of Lent with the promise and expectation that God will strengthen our hearts with confidence and love and joy. Because of what Jesus has already accomplished, we need not fear that submitting ourselves and our lives to his scrutiny will end in our destruction. God promises that for those who confess their sins and repent, for those who seek him, for those who hunger for him and his righteousness, they will find their strength renewed, they will have their joy restored, and they will delight in the richest of fare.

## WHAT DO I DO?

Remember that this is a season. By this we understand that it is a time that is not like other seasons. You should always love God and you should always be doing the things he loves. But as a season, you are especially attentive to those things. Now, there are many ways a person may observe Lent, here are a few ways for you to consider:

1. *Work your repentance: fast and pray.* Consider fasting. If you've never fasted before, there are resources listed below to help you think about how to do that. Consider setting apart regular times each day to pray and ask God to show you your sin and the greatness of his provision in Jesus Christ.
2. *Work your heart and mind: read and study.* Consider focusing in on a topic, theme, or book of the Bible. Follow the theme through scripture or meditate on a passage. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you God's greatness and glory. The imagery of feeding is powerful because it captures so well the activity of setting your heart on something, of absorbing it. In fact, the Hebrew word for "meditate" means "to chew".
3. *Work your compassion and mercy: service and justice.* Consider giving up time during your day to serve. Look for the needs which other's have which you can address. Seek to right wrongs by overcoming evil with good. There are lots of opportunities. Ask God to show you.
4. *Open your heart to God.* Lastly, pray as the Psalmist pray in Psalm 139: 23 when he prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

## Resources

*Repentance and the 21st Century Man*, by C. John Miller

*A Hunger for God*, by John Piper

"The Duty, Benefits, and the Proper Methods of Religious Fasting",

Samuel Miller. The complete text may be found at [http://](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/Fastings.htm)

[www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/Fastings.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/Fastings.htm)

*A Celebration of Discipline*, by Richard Foster

*The Praying Life*, by Paul Miller

*Counterfeit Gods*, by Timothy Keller

"All of Life is Repentance", Timothy Keller

*Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, by Thomas Chalmers

## Lenten Prayer By Tonya Stanley

*Darkness came upon us,  
As inward we looked,  
A season of fasting,  
What must we give up?  
A time of repentance,  
Why must you have come?*

*A child full of grace,  
Looking back at the cross,  
Draped all in black,  
A reflection of the cost,  
A heart giving back,  
For all that has been lost.*

*Days full of fasting,  
Draining off the dross,  
Remembering Jesus,  
His shed blood, what it wrought,  
Coming before Him,  
May we kneel, as we give Him our heart.*