

## **A Primer on the Season of Lent**

### **Introduction:**

One cannot understand the season of Lent if one does not appreciate that the church has had a yearly cycle that revolves around the life and ministry of Jesus. The church year begins with the Annunciation to Mary, the beginning of the Advent Season. It then follows the life of Jesus from birth, to his ministry, then to the cross, his death and resurrection. This takes us to Easter. Fifty days later we have the celebration of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church. From Pentecost to Advent is what is known as Common Time and there the ongoing life of Jesus through His church is celebrated.

The church established rhythms that repeated every year, and what we call holidays today started as feast days in the church: Christmas, Easter, etc. The holiest days of the church year would be Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday when Jesus completed the work of atonement for our salvation, and conquered sin and death.

Lent is part of the rhythm of the church year. The word “Lent” comes from Germanic background and symbolizes “lengthening”, as in the lengthening of days as Spring arrives. It is forty days in length (not counting Sundays) and ends with the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus.

### **Purpose:**

Lent is a season of reflection, confession and repentance. It is about reflecting on our sinfulness so that we appreciate all the more what Jesus did for us that first Easter weekend. It is not to be a season of morbid introspection (“I am such a bad guy”) but a season of preparation (“Humbly I bow before you, Jesus, and receive the life you offer”). Always it is to point us to Jesus, and not to ourselves. It usually includes fasting and self-denial to help us remember the price Jesus paid for our salvation.

Humility and repentance is essential to the Christian faith, as is fasting and prayer. Let us remind ourselves what God’s Word says about these things:

**“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.” (Acts 3:19, NIV)**

**“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 I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14 NIV)**

## **Why Forty?**

Why do we say Lent is forty days when it actually lasts forty-six days? How did we get forty days?

Fasting and contrition has always been an important part of the Christian faith. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:16:

**“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.” (NIV)**

Note that Jesus says, “When you fast” and not “If you fast.” In the early church Wednesday and Fridays were fasting days until mid-day. Candidates for baptism also were encouraged to fast before the rite, which usually took place at Easter. The clergy also fasted in preparation for this wonderful day. Soon others were joining in and by the fourth century, it was a well-established practice in the church to fast before Easter.

Though the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD made Lent an official practice of the Catholic Church for the forty days before Easter, we have evidence of this happening in some churches before 100 AD. What that fast looked like changed over time. From the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 12 centuries it was established that Christians would eat no meat, or meat products, dairy or eggs. That started to be relaxed after the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

So why forty days of fasting and self-denial? Most believe this comes from the example of Jesus as he was starting his ministry. We read in Luke 4:1-2:

**“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.”**

A part of the Lenten message is to follow Jesus’ example of self-denial and testing. Followers of Jesus have many things that can control them when Jesus should have supreme control. Fasting helps test and prioritise our lives. The fast also helps us to be aware of Jesus, for each time we are tempted to break the fast we are reminded of why we are doing this, and what Jesus did for us.

Scripture tells us that Jesus fasted those forty days he was in the wilderness (Luke 4:2) and ate nothing. Fasting in the church usually meant they could eat one full meal a day, or two smaller meals. The Catholic Church expected all members 14 – 59 years of age to participate in a Lenten Fast. Statistics show that today 61% of Catholics do practice some self-denial during Lent, and 20% of Protestants do.

### **What is Ash Wednesday?**

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season, and is usually marked with a service and fasting. In the service ashes produced from the burning of the palm branches of the previous year’s Palm Sunday are smudged on the forehead of participants. This is a visible reminder of our own mortality :

**“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19 NIV)**

The service also features confession of sin and a chance to profess one’s devotion to God. That the ash is made from the Palm fronds of Palm Sunday reminds us that our desire is to see Jesus as king but our sin interferes with that.

It is noteworthy that the night before Lent begins Christians are to remove all the foods made through fermentation (using yeast) as a symbol of their desire to be rid of all sin from their lives. Yeast was a symbol of sin throughout scripture. For instance, Luke 12:1:

**“Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (Luke 12:1 NIV)**

It became tradition to have pancakes in many homes the night before Lent to symbolize getting rid of the yeast. Some would indulge themselves on all things found in the house with yeast – from cake to donuts, cookies to beer.

Unfortunately, in some areas this practice of indulging the night before Lent got out of hand and soon all vices were being indulged in the night before Lent. This is the beginnings of things like Mardi Gras.

Before we dismiss this practice because of its excesses, hear again the words of one who follows the true spirit of Lent:

“During Lent, we seek the Lord in prayer by reading sacred scripture; we serve by giving alms; and we practice self-control through fasting. We are called not only to abstain from luxuries during Lent, but to a true inner conversion of heart as we seek to follow Christ’s will more faithfully.” (from Catholic website)

### **Dangers of Lent**

As seen above in the account of Mardi Gras, seasons of the church can be misused and dangers creep in. This was the concern of some of the church fathers like John Calvin. His main objection was that this was a man made festival and not in scripture. Others who followed Calvin objected that some might feel they are gaining merit or adding to their salvation through the pious acts of fasting and self-denial. The rise of evangelicalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries denounced this practice as man made and led a person towards works righteousness.

The practice of self-denial, giving up something for the forty days of Lent, has also troubled some evangelicals. They believe if you should give something up, it should be completely removed from your life. It should be a lifetime surrender, not just a seasonal surrender. This mindset misses the point that the self-denial is of “luxuries” that are not bad in themselves. Certainly all vices should be surrendered to Jesus all the time, not just forty days in the year.

A modern phenomenon is the secular Lent. It is when self-denial is used for self-improvement. From breaking bad habits to losing weight, all kinds of reasons are given for the forty days of self-denial that have nothing to do with Jesus or Easter. One article told readers how many calories they are saving by giving up certain foods at Lent. Another told of a better mind set if only you practiced gratitude in

the forty days of Lent. The secular world does not want to sacrifice or suffer if there is “nothing in it for me.” That attitude is the exact opposite of what the church saw this season to mean. Lent was to get the focus off of yourself and onto Jesus, while secular Lent makes it all about “me.”

### **What Should We Do?**

Should Christians, Nazarenes in particular, observe Lent and enter into its practices in some way?

The answer is... maybe.

If we can keep the focus on Jesus, using the season to help us contemplate his sacrifice for us and how much we needed it, do it. If we want to impress others, or prove something to ourselves, or participate in self-denial for any other reason than to follow closer to Jesus, don't do it.

If we think we are earning favour with God, or deserving of some special blessing because we did this, don't do it.

If you can appreciate even more the suffering of our Lord to bring us salvation, from his fast at the start of his ministry to the physical trauma he endured to be our Redeemer, do it.

Never should we do things simply out of tradition without thinking about its meaning. That is what concerned the reformers. Nonetheless, we should not throw the “baby out with the bathwater” by simply saying, “This is Catholic and therefore I cannot do it.” Before this was a Catholic practice it was a Christian practice!

Pray, ask God what He wants you to do, and find freedom in His answer!

“Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” by Claudia F. Hernaman, 1873

Lord! Who throughout these forty days,  
For us didst fast and pray,  
Teach us with Thee to mourn our sins,  
And close to Thee to stay.

As Thou with Satan didst contend,  
And didst the victory win,  
Oh, give us strength in Thee to fight,  
In Thee to conquer sin.

As Thou didst hunger bear and thirst,  
So teach us, gracious Lord,  
To die to self, and chiefly live  
By Thy most holy Word.

And through these days of penitence,  
And through Thy Passiontide,  
Yea, evermore, in life and death,  
Jesus with us abide.

Abide with us, that so, this life  
Of suffering overpast,  
An Easter of unending joy  
We may attain at last!