

What is Lent and why should we observe it?

Many religious groups begin the observation of Lent today, Wednesday. In a ceremony marking Ash Wednesday, they will begin a 40+ day period marked by prayer, repentance, fasting, and alms-giving. This is often a time marked by giving up something pleasurable or personally enjoyable. Lent ends on the Saturday before Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. As we have seen with most long-term religious observances, the culture shifts the focus from the original intent, replacing it with something else entirely. That is why Mardi Gras, or Carnival is celebrated on Fat Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, as a last chance to party and debase oneself before beginning a period of religious devotion and piety leading up to Easter. What a messed up world we live in. But do we throw out the baby with the bathwater, or do we figure out a way to reclaim our Christian heritage and seek to reform our culture? As with Reformation Day instead of Halloween, we want to give you a choice.

Lent was one of the first church observances that early believers decided to observe. The earliest observations started shortly after the Christian church started, and was well practiced by the Second century, even if the observations differed from church to church. By the time the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire in 313, Lent had been practiced in its various formats for hundreds of years. The first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea in 325, sought to establish uniformity in beliefs and practices, and Lent was one of the topics discussed and standardized. While Lenten practices have changed over the last 1700 years, it has remained a part of many church practices. The Reformation of 1517 led to the creation of many new bible-centric denominations, which rejected many of the routine church practices, especially those without a specific scriptural basis for their observation. As a result, many Reform churches looked askance at any long-term church practice, and deliberately removed them from their observances.

So what is the biblical basis for Lent, and should we still observe it today? There are many valid reasons to reject any routine religious ceremonies or observances when we don't understand what we are doing or saying or why. We may mistakenly equate doing something with granting us special standing with God, or making us righteous in God's sight. These take away from the power of Jesus

death and resurrection, and the grace those brought to those who believe and confess Jesus as Savior and Lord. Scripture tells us that the ability to confess Him as our Savior and Lord is itself a gift from God. Nothing we can do will ever make us worthy of the price that only Jesus has paid to redeem and restore people to a relationship with the one, true, loving God.

It is commonly agreed that the early Christians were seeking some way to commemorate the importance of Jesus death and resurrection. Using the events of Jesus life and the only Scriptures they had, what we today call the Old Testament, they settled on the idea of commemorating Jesus sacrifice by mimicking His forty days in the wilderness, when Jesus went into the wilderness after his baptism and before starting His public ministry.

Matthew 4:1-11

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Mark 1:12-13

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted^[g] by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Luke 4:1-13

4 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.

³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours."

⁸ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written:

"'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

¹² Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Jesus fasted, spent time in reflection with His Father, resisted the temptations of Satan, and returned ready to engage in the ministry God had prepared Him for. The idea of spending time to purify, center on ourselves and God, and prepare to biblically lead others is a worthy goal for any believer today.

Forty days is the time Moses stayed on Mount Sinai before receiving the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 34:27-28

²⁷ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." ²⁸ Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

Elijah spent 40 days on Mount Horeb praying and fasting before the Lord told him to return to Damascus (1 Kings 19:1-18).

Jesus stayed 40 days after His resurrection, leading and teaching His followers before ascending into heaven.

Acts 1:3

³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

Matthew 6-7 describes what the Christian Life should look like and can serve as a sound model for Lenten practices.

Matthew 6:1-8

6 "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your

room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Matthew 6:16-18

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. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ 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.

Observing Lent should be a very personal decision, and your observation should be invisible and not attract any attention. Observing Lent to deepen your walk with God, spend time talking to Him, reading His word, focusing on those in need around you, eating properly, eliminating personal vices, and making time to serve the Lord are worthy pursuits anytime of the year. Use Lent as an opportunity to start a new, intentional relationship with God.

We have purchased 100 copies of the daily Lent Prayer Guide by Dr. Ryan Denison called “Walking in His Commands: A Lenten Journey with Jesus” if you are interested. Please take one per family, and read the devotional together. You can also get an electronic version or order your own book at:

www.denisonforum.org/product/walking-in-his-commands

for a donation of any amount.