



## LENTEN MEDITATION

Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27). If the God-ordained Sabbath was instituted for the sake of human needs, this is all the more true of the church's calendar, which does not derive from divine ordinance, but from the church's reflection on God's redemptive work in history and her accumulated traditions. The concept of a church calendar is certainly rooted in biblical principles (especially the fact that God gave Israel a calendar to commemorate his work on their behalf) and the pattern of the church's calendar

is drawn from the core of the biblical narrative, focused on the life of Jesus. But the way the calendar is observed is left to the prudence and practical needs of God's people. Thus, when it comes to observance of the season of Lent, we are free to modify and customize the church's traditions to better reflect the great truths of the Reformed faith. The traditional calendar is always subject to re-shaping in light of Scripture and local circumstances.

In many church traditions it is common to give something up for the forty day period of Lent. While this may be a helpful practice, training us to forgo luxuries we often spoil ourselves with and reminding us of the importance of denying the flesh, it is not necessary to observing Lent. Such "fasts" are a part of biblical theology, but the practice must be set in the context of the total witness of Scripture. The only reason for fasting from *anything* in God's good creation is to make us hunger for God himself more deeply. Otherwise, there is nothing valuable in ascetic practices as such (cf. Col. 2:20-23). There is nothing "guilty" about enjoying the pleasures of God's world (1 Tim. 4:1-5, 6:17) – if so, we would be required to give them up not just for Lent, but permanently! Lenten fasting should not call into question the fundamental goodness of creation.

In the old covenant, the prescribed calendar for Israel included 80 feast days per year, compared to only one fast day, which gives us some idea of God's priorities. This theme of feasting is only intensified in the new covenant (cf. Mt. 9:14-16). Besides, ascetic practices can easily be abused. We must remember that creation is good and everything that is received with thanksgiving can be used and enjoyed to the glory of God. Further, the ascetic practices of many Christians during this time of year fail to serve any distinctively Spiritual ends and can actually create a good deal of confusion about the nature of true discipleship (e.g., did you give up chocolate because you're really mortifying the flesh or because spring is coming?). Thus, the traditional custom of giving something up for Lent is *adiaphora*. Do it if you wish, but only if it helps you focus on self-denial for the sake of serving others. (For example, if you give up soft drinks or movies for Lent, perhaps after the Lenten season, you could give the money you saved to someone in need. That way, your asceticism becomes a mission-oriented sacrifice.)

So how should Lent work? In terms of the life of Christ, the season includes as bookends the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and his burial in garden-tomb. His predictions of his impending death and his calls to follow him in the way of the cross figure prominently. The season begins on Ash Wednesday, which itself usually has a time of preparation, culminating with Shrove Tuesday. It may seem strange to prepare for Lent because Lent itself is a time of preparation for Easter. Some wrongly turn the pre-Lenten period into a time of debauched partying (e.g., "carnival" or "Mardi Gras" in American pop culture).

The pre-Lenten season is only worth observing if we do so to remind ourselves that whatever special disciplines, sacrifices, or repentances we undertake during Lent are grounded in the grace of the gospel. The final days before Lent should be a time of transitioning from the season of Epiphany, which celebrates the manifestation of Christ in the eyes of the nations, to a more solemn season focused on the next phase of his ministry. In the gospel narratives, the Transfiguration (celebrated as the last Sunday in Epiphany, before Lent begins) serves as a natural tuning point. After the Transfiguration, Jesus sets his face like flint, moving towards Jerusalem and the cross, determined to fulfill his Father's painful mission.

The season of Lent runs through "Holy Week," up to Easter Sunday (though the Sundays of Lent are not counted as part of the season because the Lord's Day can never be a time of fasting; accordingly, we count Lord's Days "of" rather than "in" Lent). In all, Lent lasts 40 days, corresponding to biblical periods of testing and trial, particularly Israel's time in the wilderness and the period of Jesus' temptation. Other blocks of "40" include the days of rain during Noah's flood, the time Moses and Elijah spent at Horeb (representing the Law and the Prophets), and time period between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Ash Wednesday is a reminder that "for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (cf. Gen. 3:19) and sets the tone for the season. Death looms over us all; our only hope is to journey towards Easter, and resurrection life in Christ on the other side of the crucifixion. Thus, Lent has rightly been called a time of "bright sadness": We live in the shadow of the cross, but the light of the resurrection is breaking over on the horizon, fast approaching. Lent calls upon us to grab the past with one hand (Christ's death) and the future with the other (our resurrection hope), and to live in the present in terms of the "already/not-yet" tension of the biblical story. As we learn to mortify the flesh (the cross), we are also vivifying the life of Christ within us (the resurrection).

The season of Lent derives its name from the "lengthening" of daylight this time of year. Traditionally, Lent centers on four major themes, all of which are intertwined: [1] Lent is a period in which we focus on **the sufferings of Christ**. Thus, Good Friday is really the high (or low!) point of Lent. Lent presses into us the truth that the cross is our only hope of salvation. We are sinners, so new life must come through his sacrificial death. Lent draws us more fully into the Passion of Christ. The final events before Christ's death – his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his institution of the Lord's Supper, his upper room discourse – as well as the cross itself and his burial, are all highlighted during "Holy Week." [2] Lent is about **discipline and devotion**. It focuses us on the cost of discipleship and the continual call to repentance. In particular, Maundy Thursday of "Holy Week" focuses on the "new command" (Latin: *mandatum novum*) that Christ gave his disciples to love one another, and his exemplary act of service in washing

their feet. But note, the distinctive, sacrificial life Christ calls us to embrace and embody is not something separable from the work of Christ on the cross. Indeed, Christ's death not only secures our forgiveness of sin (justification), it also secures our death to the power of sin (sanctification). While various Lenten customs have arisen in order to encourage a lifestyle of self-denial and sacrifice, the cross of Christ, and our own participation in the cross through repentance from sin, should be central. Lent reminds us of the great price Christ paid to become our Savior, and the great price we must be willing to pay in order to be his disciples. Our hope is to be conformed to Christ's own pattern of life as the one who entered into resurrection glory through suffering. He died sacrificially; we must live sacrificially, by taking up our cross daily and pursuing a cruciform lifestyle. Lent encourages a life of disciplined, fruitful faith, for the only faith that counts is a faith that works love (Gal. 5:5-6). [3] Lent reminds us that **death is a reality in a fallen world**. The whole Christian life is preparation for death and subsequent judgment. Lent gives us a small taste of death by focusing on the cross and our own impending deaths (cf. Ps. 90). Lent reminds us that life is short and we must learn to live each day to the glory of God. We should not carelessly squander the time God gives us, for life is but a mist. We should use our days in a way that builds God's kingdom and enriches others. Remembering we will soon die encourages daily repentance. [4] Finally, Lent is analogous to Advent. Just as Advent is time of expectation and preparation for the coming of Christ, so Lent is **a time of heightened expectation and preparation for the final resurrection**. Of course, we prepare for the resurrection most especially by looking to Christ's resurrection and learning to live in terms of it as the greatest "fact" in the history of the world. Lent is a time for remembering that the resurrection is coming, a point when sin and suffering will end. In short, the 40 day cycle of Lent is preparation for the 50 day cycle of Easter. It is a somber, sobering prelude to pure joy and triumph. It is the dark night before the bright dawn.

In our liturgy at TPC, we emphasize the themes of Lent and mark off the season in several symbolic ways. For example, we forgo the pleasure of singing during the confession of sin. We use the Decalogue (given at the beginning of Israel's 40 year period of wilderness wandering, and then again at the end of that period) to guide our confession of sin. The pastor wears a black stole to signify that death wraps itself around the necks of us all. During the rest of the year, we use leavened communion bread to symbolize the expansive growth of the kingdom (Mt. 13:33), but during Lent, we use unleavened bread to image our break with the old "Egyptian" ways of living (1 Cor. 5:6-8). We kneel for the pastoral prayer instead of our regular practice of standing in order to emphasize meekness and lowliness before God. Lent is a somber season to be sure, but having passed through a time of humbling ourselves, we are all the more ready to break forth with joy on Easter Sunday!

So what is Lent for? Peter Leithart answers: "Alexander Schmemmann captures the essence of Lent when he writes that Lent can only be understood in relation to Easter. Lent is the journey, Easter the goal. We are to live each day in the light of the promise of Easter, the promise of the new life of the kingdom. But we often fail to realize and enact the new life that we have in Christ. Lent offers a structure to help us to recover the reality of Easter, by reminding us that our journey to resurrection is always leading toward the bright dawn of the resurrection." By observing the cycle of Lent and Easter, we are better prepared to live out the rhythm of the gospel, dying to sin and living out the resurrection life of Christ. Lent is only worth observing if we do so in light of coming Easter joy; but without proper observance of Lent, Easter celebrations are cheapened and depleted of their power. In our narcissistic, self-centered culture, Lent takes on special importance.

In the early church, Lent was the time during which catechumens (those in the process of converting from paganism to Christianity) were prepared for baptism and first communion, which would take place of Easter Sunday. It was also a time of prayer for apostates (those who had departed from the faith), a time of reconciliation for excommunicates who repented and desired to be re-connected to the church, and a time of remembering the deceased in Christ. Historically, Christians have also used Lent as time to focus on sacrificial ministries of mercy and missions, since these are ways the church reflects the ministry of her Savior. Also, as already noted, Lent became a useful season for establishing or intensifying the practice of various Christian disciplines. Lent gives us one angle on the self-effacing nature of Christian living and Spirituality. All of these Lenten customs can have their place in contemporary observance of the season, but we should be diligent to emphasize that the sufferings of Christ are the heart of the Christian faith. It is Christ's suffering that frees us from the penalty, power, and (someday) presence of sin. It is Christ's suffering that sanctifies our suffering, making it a redemptive tool in our lives. It is Christ's suffering that enables us to overcome temptation and defeat Satan. It is Christ's suffering that gives us confidence, victory, and even joy in the face of death, because we know that the Risen One has already trampled down death on our behalf. It is the suffering of Christ that gives us the Spiritual resources needed to live sacrificially, fulfilling his command to love in a new way, to give generously of our time and money to those in need, and to resist the allurements of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Our Lenten disciplines are the reflex and outflow of what Christ has accomplished for us.

The key day in Lent, of course, is "Good Friday." The label "Good Friday" is likely a corruption of "God's Friday" – the day so named because the cross reveals the love and goodness of God. While Good Friday is inevitably solemn,

we should not pretend as if we do not know how the story ends. We must read the gospel story backwards. We can never divorce the cross, theologically or experientially, from the resurrection. Good Friday would not be “good” at all if not for Easter Sunday. Thus, the focus of Good Friday should not be the senseless human suffering of Jesus at the hands of twisted human authorities in church (Israel) and state (Rome). Instead the focus should be on the suffering of God in human flesh to redeem us from the curse of sin. Man’s pride can only be undone by God’s self-humiliation. Man’s rebellion can only be reversed by God’s submission. Man’s sin can only be conquered by God’s obedience. Man’s curse can only be reversed by God’s death.

Ash Wednesday services often include the imposition of ashes to the forehead as a way of renewing our identification with Christ’s death. This ritual combines several biblical themes. There are passages that describe God’s people being marked with a cross on the forehead, including Ezekiel 9:4 (cf. Rev. 22:4). Other passages connect ashes with repentance and mourning over sin or death (e.g., Jonah 3:6). Usually the ashes are made from the palm fronds used at the previous year’s Palm Sunday service – a stark reminder of how deceitful the human heart can be and that even our best acts of praise amount to nothing unless founded upon Jesus’ death. As the pastor applies the ashes to kneeling worshippers, he usually recites a phrase such as “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Ash Wednesday liturgies usually include very extensive confessions of sin and remind us of our call to journey with Jesus in the way of the cross.

The events remembered and celebrated in the Lent/Easter cycle are the heart of the Christian faith. Obviously, the incarnation, celebrated in the Advent/Christmas cycle, is foundational to the gospel. But given the fact that the gospels devote far more attention to the culminating events of the season of Lent and Easter Sunday, we should see this time of year as the highpoint of the Christian faith and the theological center of redemptive history. If we are going to inhabit the story of the gospel, we need to train ourselves and our children to observe these days in the appropriate posture of faith.

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Special days associated with Lent:

*Shrove Tuesday* (final preparation as the church transitions from Epiphany to Lent; traditionally celebrated with a pancake feast before Lenten “fasts” since eggs and fat were not allowed during Lent; “shriving” is an old English term for confession of sin and absolution)

*Ash Wednesday* (the beginning of Lent, usually observed with a “Service of Ashes” in which the church is called to reflect on the nature of sin and its

consequences [our dust-to-dustness], as well as the possibilities of new life by faith in the resurrected Christ)

*Palm Sunday* (commemorating the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, prior to the Passover and his death; usually celebrated by the church with a palm branch processional and a focus on the revolutionary nature of Christ's "upside-down" kingship)

*The Triduum* (meaning the last "three days" during "Holy Week," the culmination of Lent and final preparation for the season of Easter):

*Maundy Thursday* (taken primarily from John 13-17, combining themes of Jesus' foot-washing, the new command[mandate] to love one another as he loves, his prayer for unity, and the "Last Super;" usually commemorated by the church with a "Love Feast," including the Eucharist, and concluding with the "stripping of the altar")

*Good Friday* (called "good" because it is the day Jesus died for our badness, taking the curse of sin and death upon himself; usually celebrated by the church with a "Service of Darkness" [or "Tenebrae Service"] using readings and hymns centered on the passion story, concluding in darkness and silence)

*Holy Saturday* (the final day in Lent, commemorating the burial of Jesus' body in the tomb; customarily observed with payer vigils, leading to an Easter "sunrise" service)

The colors associated with Lent are usually purple and/or black, signifying mourning, repentance, and death.

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